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原作
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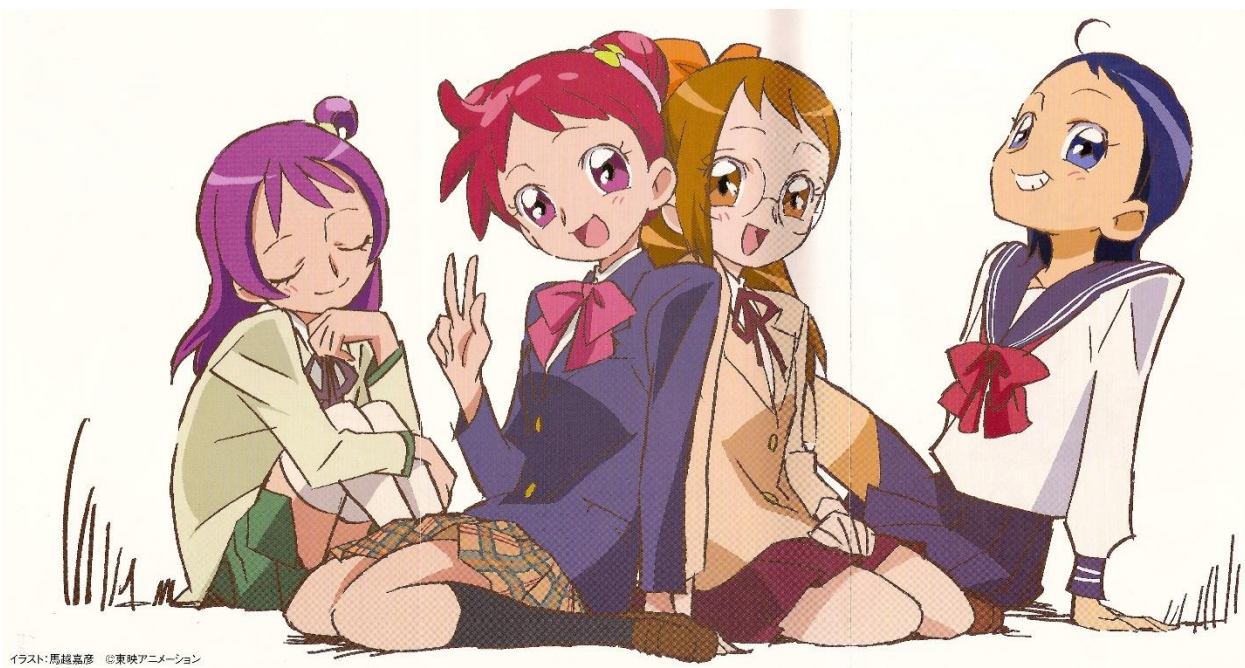
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Chapter 1 “Spring in full bloom”

Riding on the gentle breeze, a single cherry blossom petal fluttered into my room and landed on my left shoulder.

It must have flown from the cherry blossom tree, which was now shedding, in the neighbour's yard. Surely.

It sure feels great.

– There's no time for this now!

Scolding my reflection in the mirror, I looked at my odango(1) hair, of which only one side was done up, and sighed.

Ah, it's not odango hair.

My hairstyle is called the chignon. Did you know that?

"And I used to be able to do it all up in just five minutes when I was in elementary school..."

I grumbled to myself, but my face still lit up with a smile.

1: Odango hair refers to a specific type of hairstyle where the hair is tied into balls resembling round dumplings. Another famous character with this hairstyle is Tsukino Usagi from Sailor Moon.

Chapter 1 “Spring in full bloom”

Today, I would be able to meet up with everyone from Misora First Elementary. That alone was enough to make me happy.

Yes, all the graduates from Grade 6's Class 1 and 2 of Misora First Elementary would be gathering today for a reunion.

Ah, but this won't do.

There might be some people who have been reading

this thus far, but don't know about me, right?



I'll just do a self-introduction. Oh, those who already know all this can skip this part.

Cheese, nice to meet you. I am Harukaze Doremi!

Last month, I graduated from Misora Municipal Middle School with wonderful results, and have been accepted into Misora Prefectural High School. I am the happiest 15-year-old bishoujo(2) in the world!

2: Bishoujo - pretty girl

And although I am a normal high school student now, I used to be something called a "witch apprentice".

A "witch apprentice" is someone who undergoes training in order to become a witch.

As to how I became a "witch apprentice", it happened when I chanced upon the MAHO-do, a store selling magical goods, during my 3rd year of elementary school. There, I exposed the owner, Makihatayama Rika-san or Majorika, as a "witch".

Because of that, Majorika turned into a "witch frog", a kind of mysterious creature that resembles, but isn't, a frog or a bug.

And according to the "witch frog curse" laid out by the Queen of the witch world two reigns ago, the human who exposes the witch as such will become a "witch apprentice". She will then need to undertake apprentice exams, starting from Level 9, and pass the highest Level 1, to break the curse. Should she be unable to become a full witch, the curse cannot be broken.

Things happened, and I obtained the right to become an apprentice to return Majorika to her original form. However, after a discussion with my best friends and fellow apprentices Fujiwara Hazuki-chan, Senoo Aiko-chan, Segawa Onpu-chan, Asuka Momoko-chan and little sis Pop-chan, we decided to not become full witches.

We had a reason for choosing not to become witches, who had full magical powers. As for that...

"Doremi—! What are you doing?! If you don't hurry, you'll be late for the reunion—!"

Mum's loud voice travelled up from downstairs. In a shock, I glanced at my alarm clock. It was 10:40am.

Oh no~, the reunion begins at 11!

I faced the mirror once again, and started on my other chignon.

Another smile appeared on my face.

I wish to see everyone soon.

There were many whom I had not seen since the graduation ceremony. There were some who went to different middle schools, and some who moved out of Misora City totally.

By the way, my best friend Hazuki-chan, who had been accepted into Karen Girls' Academy, and I went to different middle schools. However, we would meet up every Saturday at each other's homes or at the library, so I see her a lot.

Ai-chan had returned to Osaka, and last year, she went on a school excursion trip with her middle school to Shikoku. Even though her grandpa was ill at that time, she still came to Shin-Osaka Station, so we managed to meet then.

After that, Ai-chan's family started to take care of their grandpa, and I think he had already gone on a journey to heaven since.

It was a moment of true fate, and the whole family managed to stay together through Ai-chan's efforts, but he died in less than two years. I really don't understand life.

However, Ai-chan commented that:

"He's been really calm, and looks so well recently"

Therefore, her mum looked after him till the very end, fulfilling her filial duty, and so they didn't feel too depressed by his death.

Of course, I had not seen Momo-chan, who had gone to New York, for nearly 3 years. However, we send each other mails once every other day.

It's too bad that she won't come today.

As for Segawa Onpu-chan... We had been keeping in contact up till half a year ago, but when the new year began, we somehow lost contact. The last time we met up in person was about a year ago too.

3: Shikoku is the smallest and least populous of the four main islands of Japan, located south of Honshu and east of the island of Kyushu.

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For today's reunion, Hazuki-chan, who handles the affairs for Class 2, told me that Onpu-chan had sent in a quick reply stating her absence.

What was happening with Onpu-chan? I'm so worried.

Speaking of that, Ai-chan had not confirmed her attendance for today too. When we spoke on the phone recently, she said that:

"Of course I'll be there!"

Well, it's Ai-chan. I think she probably just forgot to confirm.

Lastly, Hana-chan... I hadn't seen her since Majorika closed MAHO-do and returned to the witch world with Lala and Dodo and the other fairies.

When we were in middle school, Hazuki-chan and I would talk about Hana-chan every time we met,

but we always ended up crying, so it had become a taboo topic between us now.

Of course, the postcard about the reunion wouldn't have reached the witch world, so Hana-chan's absence today was confirmed.

Hana-chan, how are you?

I'm sure she is working hard to become the next Queen of the witch world, under the guardianship of Majorika...

Just then, Mum's voice rang out again.

"Doremi—! I'm not bothering with you if you are late—!"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming!"

Slinging my pink bag, which matched with Hazuki-chan's, over my shoulder, I burst out of my room at top speed.

As I was descending the stairs, I felt a pin holding my chignon together start to loosen,

"Wahh!"

Sadly, I missed a step, and

"Uwaaaaaaah—!"

I tripped and fell.

"Ouch..."

"Did you trip and fall again~? You never change even after entering high school, big sis"

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Standing over my clumsy self, Pop, who had emerged from the living room together with Mum and Dad, commented with a sly face.

"What is that way of speech! Is that how you speak to your big sis who's a high school student?!"

I glared at Pop as she walked over,

"I always speak like this. You got into high school only because Hazuki-chan helped you with your studies, and only with barely passable results!"

Gasp! And I just said that I was accepted with wonderful results... Boo-hoo-hoo.

Sorry, I lied.

As Pop had said, Hazuki-chan, who did not need to take exams, helped me out with my studies from autumn last year all the way to the last day before exams.

Ahahaha...

"Seems like you're not hurt. Even as a high school student, Doremi is still Doremi. Hahahahaha"

Dad laughed as he helped me up.

"Oh, it's been a long time since you did odango hair"

That's my Mum. She always notices every change in her daughter.

"I spent thirty minutes working on these, but now they're all messy..."

"So that's why you're late. It's hard to do this style with shorter hair, right? Leave it to Mum"

Swish swish swish!

A few quick seconds later, Mum had redone my chignons.

"Oh, that's cute. Dad really likes this odango head"

"They're called chignons..."

As I puffed out my cheeks, Pop came in with another hateful comment.

"You cut your hair short when
the guy you liked in 8th Grade rejected you.

Why do you want to tie your hair up in chignons again?"

Double gasp! To rub salt onto these wounds in my heart which I wished to forget!

Just as I was about to deny it, Mum said:

"Doremi, you're late, late!"

"Wahh, this won't do!"

As I put on my shoes in a panic, Dad poked his head out and asked,

"Wait a moment! I've never heard about you liking anyone! Doremi, who was that guy?!"

"It's alright, let her be! Don't ask about the past anymore. By the way, when I was cleaning your room this morning, I found a new fishing rod that I've never seen before..."

"Gasp!"

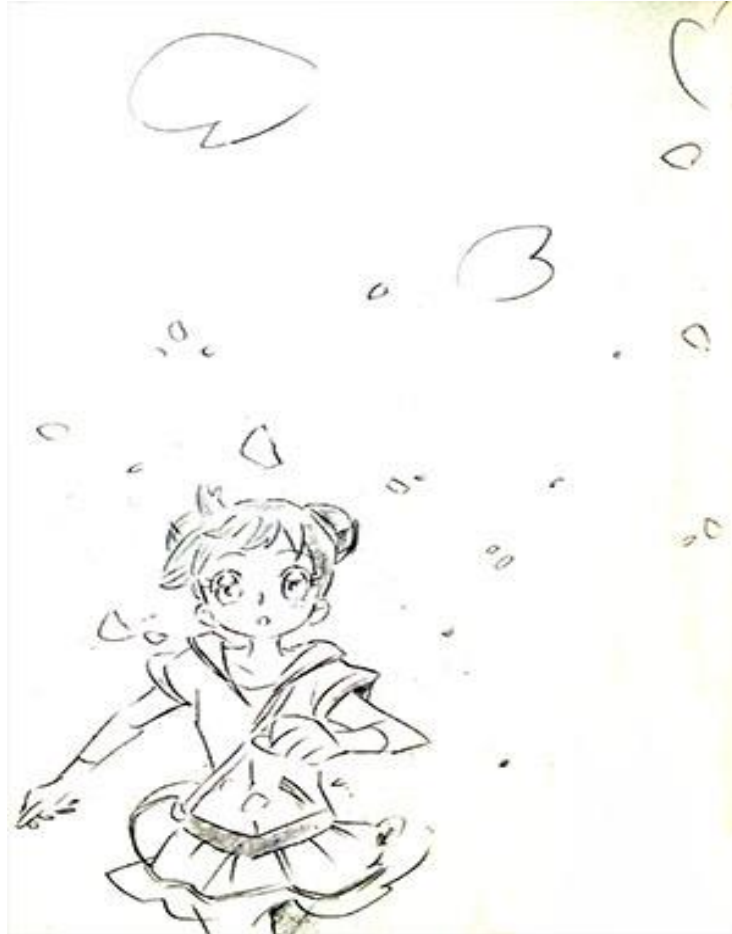
"Let's talk about that"

Thanks to Mum, who had grabbed Dad's ear and pulled him back into the living room, my old wounds received no more hurt.



"That Pop is such a brat"

I said to myself as I ran along the road to Misora First Elementary, where the reunion was to take place.



Even though our family's finances are in dire straits now, Pop is thinking of enrolling in, of all places, Karen Girls' Academy.

Karen Girls' Academy is a school integrating middle, high and university level education. The music faculty, which Hazuki-chan is enrolled in, is special for its teachers and professors, who are all famous musicians. Many graduates from the school have become professional composers and performers too. Plus, it's a private school, so tuition fees are expensive.

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Due to the dying down of the mountain stream fishing fad, Dad, who works as a writer for fly fishing, had seen a decrease in his workload. Recently, he had started writing about sea fishing. As for Mum, she is teaching piano to preschool kids from home in order to balance the finances, but...

Because of that, Dad had been grumbling about being unable to freely afford a new fishing rod for sea fishing.

But seems like he bought it in the end...

Mum must be really angry now.

The only hope is that I'm attending a public school, so tuition fees are cheap and thus can help the family save up.

However, Pop has a talent with the piano, so I hope that she will always continue on with it.

Well, that's if she gets into Karen Girls' Academy in the first place.

And like me, since we are both made up of the same parents' DNA, she is having difficulties with her entrance exams too.

When she was in 5th Grade, Seki-sensei took over her lessons, so both Mum and Pop got reassured by that. However, the exams are still up to the individual's ability.

Ah, isn't Seki-sensei an alumnus of Karen Girls' Academy herself?

Alright, I will consult Seki-sensei during the reunion, and we'll try to somehow motivate Pop to get into Karen Girls' Academy.



The cherry blossom trees in the schoolyard of Misora First Elementary, which is located on a sunny patch of high ground, were all shedding too.

It is only the beginning of April, so it feels a little sad.

Oh well, we did have a warm winter this year, so the flowers bloomed earlier than usual. It can't be helped.

– But now's not the time to stand around idly admiring the scenery.

The hands of the clock tower above the school's main gate hovered near 11am.

Oh no, I'm late!

Gasping for breath, I rushed into the old classroom for Grade 6 Class 1.

"Out!"

The sound of everyone's shout echoed.

"Wh-wh-what was that~?!"

With a pitiful expression, I scratched my head and asked, to which Tamaki Reika replied sarcastically,

"Harukaze-san, you've not changed even one bit, even as a high school student"

Tamaki~! You are the one who hasn't changed!

Just as I was about to retort, I remembered that I was the one at fault this time.

"Well, nice to see you too"

That's a response befitting an adult.

"Now that Harukaze is here, shall we finally begin?"

"Yes!"

Just as all of us started moving to our old seats,

"Seki-sensei!"

Yokokawa Nobuko-chan waved her arm.

"What is it, Yokokawa?"

"Since we're not having lessons now, shall we arrange the desks to form a U-shape? I think that'll be better, as we can see each other's faces easily"

"Nice idea, Nobuko-chan! Sensei, let's do just that!"

I immediately agreed with the idea, and the other's voices soon joined in. Everyone then picked up their desks and chairs and shifted to surround Seki-sensei.

For some reason, Nobuko-chan moved in next to me.

Since Momo-chan and Hana-chan were absent, I was initially worried that I would have had no one to talk to. Now, I should have been relieved, but I felt a little strange at the same time.

What was so strange?

That's right! It's Miho-chan.

Maruyama Miho-chan, who was always by Nobuko-chan's side.

Through the shifting of classes in Grade 5, the two of them came together. Nobuko-chan, who loved to use her imagination and aspired to become a

novelist, and Miho-chan, who always lost herself in her dreams of becoming a manga artist, became a combi that pumped out lots of interesting manga, which were sometimes funny, sometimes sad, and sometimes surprising, all of which we used to enjoy.

Even when they entered middle school, they remained best friends, submitting their works to various shojo manga magazines. Even though they might not have been selected for publication, their manga were often given honourable mentions.

I thought that they would surely become pros together someday, but what's happening now...?

Curious, I took a peek at Miho-chan, who was sitting in a spot furthest away from us.

Miho-chan had her eyes cast down, but then she looked up for a moment at us, as if curious about Nobuko-chan.

However, once she noticed my gaze, she cast her eyes downwards again.

Just what had happened between her and Nobuko-chan?

With my usual nosiness, I lifted my head to ask Nobuko-chan about it.

Suddenly, the door at the back of the classroom was thrown open with force, and a nostalgic face leapt into view.

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"Sorry that I'm late! How has everyone been?"

It was my best friend, Ai-chan.



"Ai-chan, long time no see!"

Before I could rush over, Nobuko-chan was already there hugging Ai-chan.

"Nobu-chan, you look well!"

Pulling away from Nobu-chan's nuzzling, Ai-chan came over to me,

"Doremi-chan, congrats for getting into high school!"

"Thank you! Yay!"

Smiling, we high-fived each other.

"I was so worried. You didn't send in a reply stating your attendance today, and I couldn't contact you either"

"Sorry sorry. There was just too much stuff and confusion. But I did tell you during our call that I'll definitely come"

"That's true, but... Oh well"

Just then, we heard Seki-sensei clearing her throat.

In a panic, Ai-chan looked over to Seki-sensei,

"Ah, Seki-sensei. Sorry for being late"

With a wry smile, Seki-sensei replied,

"That's not the point. Senoo, which graduating class were you in?"

"Grade 6 Class 2..."

At that moment, Tamaki stood up and said,

"Senoo-san, this is Grade 6 Class 1!"

"Ahh—!"

Ai-chan shouted, her mouth opening so wide that I wondered if her jaw would unhinge.

In a moment, the classroom was engulfed in roaring laughter.

However, she is still our Ai-chan, an Osaka native.

"You didn't call? You didn't call? Sorry for my rudeness once again!"

She quickly followed up with an old joke from Crazy Cats. However, Seki-sensei was the only one who got it. The rest of us just stared blankly.

"Aha, ahahaha. What's this, don't you know this legendary Crazy Cats joke?"

"Senoo, that's just too old"

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With Seki-sensei's retort, Ai-chan laughed in embarrassment.

"Bye!"

With that, she dashed out of the classroom.



Within moments, loud laughter could be heard coming from the classroom next door. Ai-chan was probably relating the incident of her mixing up the classrooms.

Ai-chan is really great. She has the power to change everyone's mood in just a moment.

I heard from Hazuki-chan later on that Class 2' s reunion was not going so well due to the gloomy topic of Onpu-chan's absence, but thanks to Ai-chan, the atmosphere lightened up in an instant.

I'll talk more about Ai-chan later. Our class' reunion was getting really exciting too.

First, Seki-sensei asked after us one by one, inquiring about our memories of middle school and our current situation.

"So, who shall we start with first?"

"Let's go by register number"

Rinno Masato-kun, our class committee member, replied immediately.

"Hmm, register number 1 is...?"

Surveying the group of us, Seki-sensei asked.

"It's Asuka-san"

Itou Kouji-kun, who is register number 2, replied.

"I've been in constant e-mail contact with Momo-chan all this while. Her dad's company is undertaking a huge project in China now, so she will be returning to Japan this autumn"

Upon hearing my report, the boys cheered. Momo-chan may be an airhead, but she is really earnest, so she is popular amongst the guys.

With that, we started talking about our current situations, starting with register number 2 Itou-kun.

Following the sequence, we told Seki-sensei about memories from middle school which she didn't know about, as well as the high school we're enrolled in, and things which we've been obsessed with lately.

Of all the accounts, Kotake's was the one which everyone was interested in most.

During elementary school times, he was a jokester who was even shorter than me, but after entering middle school, he started to grow taller, and he is already 180cm now.

As a bonus, he became the captain and ace striker of the soccer team in middle school, and was really popular and stuff with the junior girls...

And of all things, he actually rejected me!

I'll elaborate on that later, but ever since I entered the classroom today, he didn't even look at me once.

That Kotake...!

Sorry, I got caught up in my personal feelings.

Unlike me, Seki-sensei was all smiles as she listened to the growing up stories of all her students.

However, there was one account that caused Seki-sensei's expression to cloud over.

Miho-chan, whom I was curious about too, only talked about being accepted into a private high school that hosts a manga research department. Aside from that-

"Nothing interesting happened in middle school"

She said, before abruptly ending her account.

But she and Nobuko-chan had been creating manga together through middle school...

Ah, talking about that, Nobuko-chan, like me, enrolled in Misora High School.

Why isn't she in the same school as Miho-chan?

I'll try to ask her later.



"Doremi-chan, how was Class 1's reunion?"

Ai-chan asked as we entered the karaoke lounge's largest room, where Classes 1 and 2 were having a combined after-party.

"So so, I guess"

I replied vaguely.

"Harukaze-san, what are you saying! We had such fun talking about our elementary school graduation ceremony!"

Shimakura Kaori-chan, who was nearby taking photos of everyone, countered, pushing up her glasses as she spoke.

"That was when Doremi-chan locked herself up in MAHO-do, wasn't it?"

Hazuki-chan added, the lens of her glasses sparkling in the light.

"That's right, it was so exciting! I'll never ever forget it, that unique graduation ceremony," Ai-chan said.

"Kaori-chan, don't bring up unnecessary things~! Everyone kept on teasing me about it just now"

The latter half of Class 1's reunion was truly fun, with all the talk about our graduation ceremony, but it was really embarrassing for me.

Just then, we heard the singing voices of Seki-sensei and Nishizawa-sensei, the teacher in-charge of Class 2.

Nishizawa-sensei got married a year earlier than Seki-sensei, and was now on maternity leave. She came today with her baby in tow.

The song the happy duo was singing was the duet "Oyome Samba". At the beginning, Nishizawa-sensei had to force Seki-sensei to sing, but she slowly got into it, and the two ended up dancing and singing together, before being showered with applause.

Nishizawa-sensei then took over the mike for a one-woman show, until the baby's crying forced her to reluctantly let go of the mike. After that, everyone took turns to sing.

Sagawa Yuuji-kun, Oota Yutaka-kun and Satou Jun-kun's SOS Trio and Sugiyama Toyokazu-kun and Ogura Kenji-kun's Toyoken Combi also got into a lame joke competition. It was all so fun, but Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan and I stayed in a corner of the room, indulging in a girls' chat.

Ai-chan got the ball rolling.

"Doremi-chan, how are you and Kotake these days?"

I was hesitant to answer at first, but knowing that Ai-chan would grill me about it out of worry, I opened my heavy mouth.

"Nothing is happening. There's been no news since then..."

"Is that so... Anyway, why did it take you so long to write him a love letter?"

"Well, that's my fault..."

Hazuki-chan admitted with a remorseful voice.

"It's not Hazuki-chan's fault"

I immediately countered.

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The story went like this. In the autumn of our 8th Grade, Hazuki-chan was getting along really well with Yada Masaru-kun, and I started to grumble about it to her.

"You're lucky... Why can't I find a wonderful boyfriend too? Is it because I don't have enough girl power?"



"That's not true. There is a boy who sees all of Doremi-chan's good points, and whom I think likes Doremi-chan"

"Really?! Who, who, who?!"

"You really don't know?"

"Not at all"

"You are really so oblivious..."

Impatient, Hazuki-chan started to talk about the time when I boycotted the graduation ceremony and locked myself up at MAHO-do.

"Everyone was trying to coax Doremi-chan out. Kotake-kun was there too, doing his best to coax you out. Don't you remember?"

"You're right. Kotake... He told me that everyone in class really loves me"

"What's important came before that. At first, Kotake-kun started the sentence with "I", then became really embarrassed, so he changed it to "Everyone here really loves you""

"S-so, Kotake likes me?"

"Yes, he always has. Everyone in class knew about it"

"Really?... Talking about that, there were times when Kotake's behaviour caught my attention"

"It was during the school excursion trip, right?"

Hazuki-chan inquired without delay.

"Y-yes... When I slipped and fell on the banana peel Kotake discarded, on the slope back from Kiyomizu Temple"

"There was a legend saying that you would die 3 years later if you slipped on that slope"

"Yes yes. I was really scared then, so Kotake fell down on purpose too"

"He was trying to cheer up Doremi-chan, who was really frightened then"

"I see... Oh, I was really depressed because of how clumsy I was, and when I went to talk to Seki-sensei, that Kotake quietly snuck in with me too, even though we were in different groups"

"Also, when we went for the camp, Kotake-kun was the one who piggybacked Doremi-chan when you sprained your ankle"

"That happened too... So that Kotake really likes me..."

Since then, I started to take note of Kotake, and my eyes naturally started to follow him around.

Kotake, who used to be just a jokester in elementary school who always teased me, started to look like a different person.

Before I knew it, he had grown taller than me and devoted himself to soccer, and he became a cooler person. Furthermore, when I looked around him, I realized that the junior girls were also following him with adoring eyes.

I started to feel uneasy, and I spent the entire night that day apologizing for my oblivious self in a letter, as well as asking him to become my boyfriend. The next day, I called Kotake out to the coast and passed him the letter.

Since then, I've waited and waited, but no reply came. Soon after that, Kotake became the captain of the soccer team and got really busy. In Grade 9, he switched classes, and we have been on that sour note ever since then.

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After listening to my story, Ai-chan commented:

"So that's what happened... Isn't it weird, to not have replied you for more than a year and a half?"

She looked at me pitifully.

I sighed, like a heroine in a tragic drama, and replied:

"I was totally rejected"

However, Hazuki-chan, who was watching Kotake belt out "Tsubasa wo kudasai", the cheer song for Japan's soccer team, murmured:

"I don't think so..."

"Why not! It's been a year and a half, right?"

Ai-chan immediately asked.

"Doremi-chan may think that she has been totally rejected, but I think that Kotake-kun is just shy about love, much like Doremi-chan. Maybe he was just shocked?"

"Hmm? ...Ahh, that may be true," Ai-chan mused.

"He has probably been thinking of giving a reply all this while, but ended up taking a longer time than usual...?" Hazuki-chan explained.

"If that's the case, I'll go ask him about it!"

Ai-chan started to move towards Kotake, but I grabbed her arm in a panic.

"W-wait a minute! Enough about me, what about Ai-chan?"

"What about me?"

"Arima-kun"

"Oh, Anrimaa? I've dumped him"

"You dumped him?!"

Hazuki-chan and I shouted in unison.

"What happened?"

"When we were in 7th Grade, we were getting along great, being a wonderful comedy duo and all. But Anrimaa, who was supposed to play the idiot, kept making jokes on me"

Ai-chan made a fist with her hand, showing her anger.

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"He was spreading rumours about how "we would get married in the future!". Of course I got angry and dumped him!"

"F-f-for that reason alone...?"

Hazuki-chan murmured, with a stunned look on her face.

"So, is Ai-chan attached to anyone at the moment?" I asked.

"I'm obsessed with this right now, so love is being postponed"

Ai-chan waved her arms to mimic a running action.

That's right, Ai-chan joined the track team in middle school, and competed in Osaka Prefecture, winning the 100m race. She also won third place in the National Track Meet.

Ai-chan has always been great at all sports, but it seems like she has finally found a sport which she really likes.

"So you will continue with track even in high school?"

"Of course! I've already handed in my enrollment form to the teacher in-charge at Misora High School just now"

"Eh...? W-what did you just say?!"

"I said, I've handed in my enrollment form"

"The other part!"

Throughout this exchange, Hazuki-chan was giggling,

"Ai-chan, haven't you told Doremi-chan yet?"

"That's right! Doremi-chan, I'm coming back to Misora City!"

"Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

My loud voice caused everyone in the karaoke room to look over at me.

Tamaki, whose song I interrupted, glared and said,

"Don't waste my beautiful voice!"

"S-sorry, sorry!"

I bowed my head to Tamaki, grabbed Ai-chan and Hazuki-chan, and pulled them out of the karaoke room into the lobby.

"Ai-chan, are you really returning to Misora City?!"

"Really!"

"Yes!"



I embraced Ai-chan.

"And you will be joining Doremi-chan at Misora High School too, I'm so envious"

Hazuki-chan commented in an envious voice.

"But, what's happened? You've never talked about this during our phone conversations before"

I asked as we all sat down on a sofa.

"We decided on that really quickly"

Ai-chan then continued to tell us the whole story.

Coincidentally, the elderly care facility that Ai-chan's mum was working at would be opening a new branch in a town near Misora City in the middle of this month. Ai-chan's mum has been assigned to be the one in-charge at the new place.

Of course, Ai-chan's dad, who used to work in the taxi company owned by Tamaki's papa, has decided to take back his old job. The whole family would be shifting back to Misora City.

Thanks to that, I would be able to enjoy fun times in high school with my best friend Ai-chan. I couldn't be happier.

As I sat smiling, Ai-chan asked Hazuki-chan about her relationship with Yada-kun.

"Well..."

Hazuki-chan let out a huge sigh.

"Aren't you two successfully attached?"

"Successfully successful. Totally successful"

I answered impatiently, having always been painfully aware of their loving relationship.

"We are fine, but there are troubles and dissatisfactions which Doremi-chan is unaware of"

Hazuki-chan countered, a frown on her face.

Hazuki's school, Karen Girls' Academy, was really strict on boy-girl relationships, and so forbade them from going out together alone.

And even though Yada-kun often visits Hazuki-chan at her home, and Hazuki-chan sometimes visits him at his house, Hazuki-chan's mama or housekeeper always tagged along.

"Hazuki-chan is being overprotected, as usual," Ai-chan commented.

"But you two get along so well together, isn't that all that matters?" I asked.

"It's not all that matters. I'd like us to go out on a date together alone sometime!"

Hazuki-chan raised her voice.

Ai-chan immediately let out a teasing smile,

"What would you like to do on a date alone? Don't tell me, you want to do that? Or that?"

"Th-that...? Or that?!"

Hazuki-chan's face was scarlet, as if burnt.

"Why are you all red! Won't you like to watch a movie together, or go to the amusement park?"

I commented, feigning ignorance and playing along. Ai-chan also added,

"That's what I meant. Hazuki-chan, were you thinking of something else?"

"Oh, no. Well, I..."

Watching Hazuki-chan panic, Ai-chan and I burst out laughing, holding our sides.

"Doremi-chan, Ai-chan, stop it!"

Hazuki-chan joined in the laughter too, despite her anger.

"It feels like we've returned to our elementary school days"

I said, and the other two smiled and nodded.



In the end, after the after-party, all of us took a photo together and decided on our next reunion, which was to take place 5 years later when we were 20 years old. All of us then went our separate ways.

Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan and I, who had not chatted enough, decided to continue on to my place.

Walking on the road beside the river, we continued our conversation.

The evening sun reflected on the river, dyeing our faces crimson.

From the karaoke lounge until this point, we had been on the topic of Segawa Onpu-chan, whom none of us could contact.

Ai-chan, like Hazuki-chan and myself, had been talking and texting Onpu-chan on the mobile as usual up to half a year ago, but when the new year arrived, she had cut off all contact.

"I thought that I could find out about what happened once I met with you girls..."

"We thought so too," I replied.

"If we could use magic now, we could find out the reason right away"

Hazuki-chan said with a sigh.

"We've stopped being witches, so that can't be helped"

I told her with a serious face, causing Hazuki-chan to panic and wave her right hand,

"A joke. It was a joke"

"Well, you were at least half-serious about it", Ai-chan said.

"Eh?"

Hazuki-chan stared at Ai-chan, stunned.

"Haha. I was actually thinking the same thing," Ai-chan admitted.

"What, Ai-chan too?" I asked.

" "Ai-chan too"? So Doremi-chan thought so too?"

Hazuki-chan asked, pushing her glasses up her nose.

"Pinpon pinpon"

I felt the same way too. Magic can be really useful.

It was when we had crossed the bridge and were climbing up the gently-sloping path. Suddenly, I felt a cold wind, and three dandelion seeds floated past before our eyes.

I didn't know the reason, but I felt some vague premonition.

"Dandelion?"

I murmured, as my eyes chased after the three seeds.

The seeds slowly floated down the slope's opposite side.

"Eh?! It can't be?!"

I shouted out unconsciously.

"Doremi-chan, what's the matter?"

I heard Hazuki-chan call out behind me.

"The two of you, look at that!"

"Eh? That's..."

Following my pointing finger, the two of them looked over, and there it was. The very same MAHO-do, where I first met Majorika seven years ago.





"Ahhhh—!! It can't be—!!"

This time, Ai-chan was the one shouting.

True, that was the exact spot where the MAHO-do once stood, but it was demolished when Majorika and the others returned to the witch world. It should be a vacant lot.

"Are we dreaming?"

So saying, Ai-chan pinched her cheek.

"Ouch! It's not a dream!"

"What is happening?!"

"No use talking! Let's go see!"

Caught in the moment, we dashed across a nearby bridge, down the slope, and to the front of MAHO-do.

The shop's sign read "Makihatayama Rika's Maho-do".

"This sign and building, it's from seven years ago, right?"

I asked, to which Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan nodded mutely.

It happened then.

The entrance to MAHO-do opened noisily, and a nostalgic figure came forward.



It was Majorika herself.

**END OF CHAPTER 1**

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Just as we reached the front of MAHO-do, the three dandelion seeds twirled in the weathervane's wind, before being sucked into the building through the skylight.

It was then that Majorika stepped out of the entrance of MAHO-do.

"Majorika!"

My loud voice seemed to have shocked Majorika for an instant, but her features immediately changed in an instant.

"Doremi! Oh, Hazuki, and isn't that Aiko! It's been so long!"

We ran up to Majorika and embraced her, sharing the joy of reunion after being apart for three years.

Majorika's hairstyle was still in its usual chignons, like mine, but a few white hairs could be spotted hiding within.

"Have you aged?..." The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them.

Majorika would definitely have hit me if I had said that out loud.

I smiled happily, but I was suddenly swarmed with questions.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Majorika, what is happening? Weren't you staying in the witch world until Hana-chan becomes Queen?"

"..."

Majorika frowned, and her expression soured.

Faced with a silent Majorika, Ai-chan grew impatient before I did, and asked,

"Did something happen in the witch world?"

Hazuki-chan continued in a worried voice,

"Did anything happen to Hana-chan...?"

"...Who cares about that brat"

Spitting out these words, Majorika turned away.

"What is "that brat"! Isn't Majorika Hana-chan's guardian?"

I pointed out, to which Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan nodded vigorously.

"Humph! I quit being her guardian"

"Eh, quit?!"

We stared at each other, before questioning her further.

"Well, to speak the truth, Hana was the one who forced me to quit. In other words, I was fired. Fired."

Majorika explained with a pained expression on her face.

"What is this?! If that's the case, who is looking after Hana-chan now?"

Ai-chan asked, grabbing Majorika by the shoulders and pulling her face closer.

Majorika seemed to want to escape from Ai-chan's straight gaze, and averted her eyes.

"Majoruka is"

A small shadow spoke as it flew slowly out of the entrance. It was Majorika's fairy, Lala.

"Lala!"

"All of you are looking well"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Save the greetings for later. Lala, why was Majorika fired and Majoruka assigned as Hana-chan's guardian?"

I asked, worried.

"Well..."

Lala glanced at the sullen Majorika before continuing with a wink,

"Well well, it's finally a reunion, so let's not talk whilst standing out here. Let's talk inside the store, we have some tea ready"

"That's right. It's getting cold out here too"

Hazuki-chan immediately assented.

True, even though it's already April, the evenings are still chilly. I shivered in the breeze blowing in from the river.

"Doremi-chan, let's go inside"

At Ai-chan's urging, I followed Majorika and Hazuki-chan into MAHO-do.



MAHO-do looked the same as when I first met Majorika, filled with lots of suspicious-looking magical goods.

The pleasant fragrance of Darjeeling hung in the air inside the dimly-lit store.

Both Majorika and Lala now make tea without magic. They boiled the water, warmed up the mugs, and poured everyone a cup using their own hands.

They had picked up this habit after spending four years with us.

Until then, they had been using magic to prepare both tea and food.

They must have watched us as we boiled Hana-chan's milk bottle to disinfect it, tested the milk's temperature, then fed it to Hana-chan, every loving action done without magic.

So, even tea, if made with hospitable care and love, would be delicious.

Thinking about that filled my body and heart with warmth, and I asked Lala about the situation between Hana-chan and Majorika.

"Majorika is totally not at fault here. Hana-chan is the bad one"



## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"What did you say?!"

It was the exact opposite of what I had in mind. Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan and I stared at each other.

According to Lala, when they first returned to the witch world three years ago, Hana-chan thought of us everyday, and was often on the verge of tears.

However, Majorika acted like a real mother to her, sometimes hardening her heart and scolding Hana-chan, sometimes showering her with lots of love. Slowly, Hana-chan stopped crying, and entered the magical preschool in high spirits.

"You just have to quickly learn all the magic and become a witch suited to be Queen, then you can visit Doremi and the rest anytime"

Majorika often said to encourage Hana-chan.

Thanks to that, Hana-chan's magical powers grew dramatically, and this year, she managed to skip a grade and was enrolled in magical elementary school.

Hana-chan was happy at first, but in February, she suddenly announced that she did not want to attend magical elementary school anymore.

Majorika and Lala assumed that it was because she did not like being separated from her preschool friends, and was throwing a tantrum.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Your preschool friends Atarimeko-chan and the others will be entering elementary school in a year too," Majorika explained.

"You will make new friends in elementary school. Atarimeko-chan and the others will still be your friends, so Hana-chan will have more friends than anyone else," Lala added.

"And that's a really wonderful thing," Majorika concluded.

This gentle explanation should have appeased Hana-chan, but she soon started throwing tantrums again.

The tantrums escalated day by day, and the house in which everyone was living in was almost destroyed by Hana-chan's magic on one occasion.

Majorika managed to return the house to its original state by using magic, but since that day, Hana-chan stopped speaking to Majorika and the others.

Majorika and Lala, plus Hana-chan's fairy Toto and our former fairies Dodo, Rere, Mimi, Fafa, Roro, and Nini had a discussion, and concluded that maybe Hana-chan was going through a rebellious phase.

Everyone then made a promise to tolerate Hana-chan until she moved past the rebellious phase, no matter what happened and what she did. However...

Hana-chan gave everyone a hard time on purpose. Even the fairies, who used to be Hana-chan's mobile toy when she was a baby and should be on good terms with her, were not spared.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

Majorika then summoned Hana-chan's best friend Pao-chan the white elephant to try to reverse her mood, but it had no effect at all.

Reluctantly, Majorika hardened her heart and scolded Hana-chan, but it had the opposite effect. Hana-chan ripped Majorika's precious treasure to shreds.

Do you know about Majorika's precious treasure?

Yes, it's the red ribbon carnation that Hana-chan gave to Majorika on Mother's Day.

That was the last straw for Majorika, who yelled at Hana-chan and gave her a good spanking.

I fully understood Majorika's feelings.

I would have done the same thing, if I had been in her place.

However, it turned out to be a bad move.

Crying, Hana-chan dashed to the palace and showed her red and bruised bottom to the Queen, whilst telling of Majorika's abuse and begging for a change of guardianship.

Hana-chan was the apple of the Queen's eye and much doted upon, so the Queen decided to strip Majorika of her position as Hana-chan's guardian and look for a replacement that very day.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

However, Majorin, the Queen's advisor witch, suggested that it would be better to listen to Majorika's side of the story first...

At that point, Hana-chan beat everyone to the punch by recommending, of all people, Majorika's lifelong rival Majoruka for the new guardianship.

And if it wasn't granted, Hana-chan declared defiantly that,

"Hana-chan will not become the new Queen!"

This put the Queen in a spot, and she had no choice but to grant Hana-chan's wish.

Even so, the Queen secretly invited Majorika and the others to the palace to hear their side of the story.

Just as Lala, Dodo and the other fairies were about to put the blame on Hana-chan, Majorika stopped them and admitted that she had indeed abused Hana-chan. She also acknowledged that Majoruka would make a better guardian than herself.

After that, she received permission from the Queen to move back to the human world and reopen MAHO-do, and without any further explanation regarding Hana-chan, left the palace.

I watched Majorika, who had sat down on a rocking chair and was sipping her tea, as I listened to Lala's story.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Majorika, why didn't you tell the Queen the truth?"

Hearing my question, Majorika stopped her rocking.

"Let's not talk about Hana anymore. More importantly..."

With a resigned look, Majorika tried to change the topic.

"Even so, that's not the Hana-chan we know," Ai-chan interjected.

"That's right. There must be some reason," Hazuki-chan did not allow the switch in topic as well.

But that's reasonable.

Afterall, we were Hana-chan's mothers for three years!

"Hazuki-chan is right, there must be some reason..."

Just as I was about to continue my complaint, Majorika's expression calmed unexpectedly, and she said,

"Don't worry. Dodo and the others will let me know if anything happens to Hana. Right, Lala?"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Yes. Dodo and the rest actually wanted to come here too, but Majorika managed to convince them to stay back to look after Hana-chan and find out her real intentions," Lala explained.

"Well, seems like Majorika has some good points afterall," Ai-chan said.

"That's right," the rest of us agreed.

"Shut up—!!"

Majorika's loud voice blew all of us off our chairs.

"Even though we're not related by blood, I've always thought of Hana and all you girls as my daughters! That's the least I could do!"

Majorika's rant pierced our hearts.

We had always been yelled at by Majorika, even in the past.

Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan and I looked at each other and smiled.

"W-what's so funny!"

Majorika glared as she asked.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Hehe, it's been so long since Majorika last got angry at us"

"So, what about it?"

"Haha, it's just somehow nostalgic," Ai-chan said.

"Fufu, and somehow happy..." Hazuki-chan added.

"We've spent three years apart, but it feels like we've suddenly shrunk and returned to the past," I explained.

"Humph! That's because you girls have not matured at all"

Majorika commented spitefully.

"Majorika too!"

Ai-chan was quick to retort.

"Pu—!"

Lala burst out laughing, and we all joined in, laughing from the bottom of our hearts.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

After laughing so much that our tummies hurt, Majorika presented us with an unexpected proposal.

"Lala and I have decided to stay here and sell magical goods to earn an income, together with all you girls, just like when we first met"

"You mean, toil hard to earn our keep at "Makihatayama Rika's Maho-do" again?" Ai-chan asked.

"You can say that. We were thinking of getting you girls to help out at the store again," Majorika replied.

"Ehhhh—?!"

All of us raised our voices in a shout.

"Don't be so shocked. Seven years ago, with everyone's help, we managed to earn three times the amount monthly than when we were running the store ourselves," Lala said.

"Wow, was it that much? It didn't feel like it"

Ai-chan said, scratching her head.

"That's true"



## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Hazuki-chan and I agreed.

"You girls were witch apprentices then, so you needed Magic Spheres to do magic, right? Those Spheres were really expensive then," Lala explained.

"Seriously, you girls were always using magic on the silliest things, so the Spheres ran out really fast," Majorika complained.

"Especially Doremi"

Lala gave a bitter smile and looked at me.

"W-was that so...?"

It was true, but I pretended not to realize.

"Oh well. That's not the point. More importantly, I'll give you girls wages, so you will help out with the store, right?"

Majorika asked.

"I'm fine with it. But..." Ai-chan trailed off.

"I know. You can come after your track training"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Eh?! H-how did you know I'm in the track team?"

"Even in the witch world, we watched over everyone through Majorika's crystal ball, because we promised Hana-chan that we would"

Lala smiled as she replied.

"Enough about Hana. So Aiko will be able to help out from evening until the store closes?" Majorika asked.

"Yep. Saturdays and Sundays and days without competition are all OK," Ai-chan confirmed.

Majorika closed her eyes and nodded in satisfaction, before continuing,

"I see, I see. How about Hazuki?"

Hazuki-chan looked a little troubled.

"I won't be able to give a definite reply until I've spoken to Papa and Mama..."

"Hazuki-chan, do you have other lessons aside from violin practice?"

Lala asked.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"I'm aspiring to become a violinist now, so I've stopped all other lessons. Now, my life is all about my violin"

"Oh! So that means you will have more free time than Aiko?" Majorika asked.

"I'm sorry. I have lessons on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but I have to practice on my own on the other days, so I think I'm only able to make it on Saturdays and Sundays"

"You're helping us out just by coming. It'll be alright on weekdays, if Doremi works hard," Majorika assured her.

"W-w-what?! When did I say that I would help out at MAHO-do!"

I snapped at Majorika.

"Hmm? Are you saying you won't help out?"

"It's too bad, but I'm starting out on a part-time job at a steak house owned by a friend's parents from next week on, working every evening"

I declared.

"Steak house? Do you mean Iida Kanae-chan's place?"

Ai-chan asked.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Pinpon! I get paid 900yen per hour, as well as a free meal of steak once a week. There is nothing more I'd ask for"

Saying so, the image of a steak dripping with juice came to mind, and drool started to gush out of my mouth.

Just like the one they call Pavlov's dog, right?

Well, it is steak after all, the best food which brings me happiness.

Just then, Majorika turned teary eyes to me and complained,

"Y-you brat... Are you saying that steak is more important than me, who had looked after you so well?!"

I wanted to reply, "That's right, so what?", but that was too blunt, so I just averted my gaze and mumbled,

"E-even if you say that..."

"Doremi-chan, you may love steak, but this is too cruel!" Hazuki-chan cried.

"My opinion of Doremi-chan has dropped too!" Ai-chan added.

"Y-you don't need to say all that..."

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

How could I reject the offer now that Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan had said all that.

Boo-hoo-hoo...

The steak in my mind disappeared into the dark abyss.

"A-alright, I get it. I'll do it! You will give me wages, right!"

I sulked.

"Definitely!"

"Now we can gather at MAHO-do and have a roaring good time, just like during our elementary school days!" Hazuki-chan exclaimed.

"I guess so..."

But I guess Hazuki-chan was right.

Seeing Majorika embracing Lala with happiness, I smiled too.



## Chapter 2 "MAHO-do opens for business"

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From the following day all the way until the day before our entrance ceremony into high school, we were busy preparing the MAHO-do for opening.

The "Makihatayama Rika's Maho-do" signboard was changed to the old simple "MAHO-do" sign, and we redid the interior with brightly coloured wallpaper.

The shelves holding the magical goods, the tables, chairs and other furniture were also changed to colourful poppish ones that girls would like.

Just like in the past, Majorika seems to like giving her store a dimly-lit, suspicious feel. We knew that, but we pretended not to and ignored her wishes.

I sacrificed steak for this job, so it should be OK that I get to design the interior of the shop as I please!

Once we were done refurbishing the store, we heard a familiar singing voice.

A puff of smoke suddenly appeared on the bench seat, and Dela the wholesale store witch appeared.

Dela is a true saleswoman who sells everything, appearing out of anywhere whenever she gets wind of a profitable sale, be it out of fire, water, or even the bathroom.

"Doremi-chan, Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan, long time no see"

"Cheese," I said.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Good afternoon," Hazuki-chan greeted.

"Thanks for coming to do business with us," Ai-chan added.

We shook hands with Dela as Majorika and Lala came out from the back of the store.

"As expected, Dela. Only a small handful of witches, even in the witch world, knew that I was coming back to the human world to do business..." Majorika commented.

"Hohhohho, the wholesale store witches' network is really great. You came immediately..." Lala added.

Dela surveyed the store before saying,

"Ah, a store selling magical goods, just like in the past. If that's the case, you'll need magical clay. How much should I bring?"

"That's right. Anyway, I'll stock up 30kg of that," Majorika decided.

"We'd like some amulets too, and glass beads and chains for making lucky pendants," Lala added.

The two promptly ordered all the necessary ingredients and tools for making magical goods, while we brewed a new pot of tea.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"That'll be this amount in total, how about that?"

Dela showed Majorika and Lala a grand total on her calculator. Ai-chan, who was passing a cup of tea to Dela, took a peek at the amount as well.

"Well, that's settled then," Majorika decided.

"Alright," Lala agreed.

Majorika and Lala seemed happy with the amount, but Ai-chan quickly retorted,

"What are you saying?!"

"W-what's the matter, Aiko?" Majorika asked.

"The magical clay costs too much. It's three times more the price we paid seven years ago"

"Gasp! I-is that true...? It wasn't this price?" Dela stammered.

"Nope. My memory with regards to stuff like that is the best!"

Ai-chan pressed.

"Well, if you say so, I guess I'll give you a 10% discount"



## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"10%?! We won't settle for that!"

Ai-chan took the calculator and keyed in a new amount.

"T-this little?!" Dela argued.

"If you won't settle for this, we're alright with calling for other wholesale store witches," Ai-chan countered.

"A-alright. I'll sell this to you below cost price, just to commemorate your store's opening. Payment will be settled at month's end, just like before. Bye"

Heaving a huge sigh, Dela disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"That's our Ai-chan"

Hazuki-chan said admiringly.

"Yo, meet the Osakan merchant! Thank you, thank you"

Ai-chan joked, rubbing her hands together, before bursting into laughter.

"Oh, Ai-chan"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Hazuki-chan joined in the laughter, and the store was soon filled with laughing voices.



The day of our high school's entrance ceremony was finally here.

The rain from the previous night had lifted, and the blue sky spread overhead without a cloud in sight.

It must have been due to my good behavior.

Dad had set up a camera tripod in our garden, and was peeping through the viewfinder. He then pressed the self-timer button.

I was standing right in front of the camera with Pop beside me and Mum at the back. Immediately, I struck a pose.

Dad dashed to his spot beside Mum and faced the camera, "Ready? Ok, cheese!"

Saying "Cheese" together, our whole family smiled. The shutter sound of Dad's favourite Leica camera echoed.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Our family has a habit of taking commemorative portraits together whenever one of us daughters enters or graduates from school.

"Shall we take another shot?" Dad asked, just as we heard the voices of Pop's female classmates calling her from the gate.

"Sorry, I need to go"

Hefting up her school-issued bag, Pop headed towards the gate.

"Have a safe trip. Be careful of cars"

Hearing my call, Pop waved a hand lightly.

"Rather than worry about me, be careful not to trip and embarrass yourself during the entrance ceremony." So saying, Pop laughed and dashed off.

"Oh! That Pop...!"

"It's ok, she's just worried about Doremi," Mum stopped me with a smile.

"Really..." I could only agree, as Dad peeped through the viewfinder again,

"More importantly, let's take another shot with the three of us"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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He pressed the self-timer button again.

The three of us, parents and child, posed as per normal, as the shutter sound echoed again.

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The Prefectural Misora High School, where I would be studying from today on, is located in the centre of Misora City, near the Misora Park and municipal library.

It is one of the newer public schools in the city, with a relaxed school culture and cute girls' uniform as its selling points. It is also one of the more popular public high schools despite its relatively average academic standing, with unexpectedly high acceptance rates.

For me, I almost gave up on this school so many times, due to my results only being barely above the minimum acceptance mark...

It is really nearby, the school and home.

It is much nearer than my elementary school and middle school; less than 10 minutes' walk away.

That was the biggest reason why I chose this school.

Being able to sleep for five minutes more every morning, how happy that can be...

Fufu, I'm sure you understand my point.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

I came with my parents to the school gymnasium, where the entrance ceremony was to take place, and met with a messy crowd of students and their guardians.

"New students, please move on to your respective classrooms"

"Guardians, please wait here until the entrance ceremony begins"

Following the instructions of the teacher-in-charge, I separated from my parents and headed to the classroom for 1-A.

The class roster for new students, grouped into classes from A to F, came in the mail after the acceptance letter. I was super happy to find that an unexpectedly high number of my classmates are Misora natives.

For the boys, there is Yada-kun, Hazuki-chan's boyfriend and jazz trumpeter wannabe, and Hasebe Takeshi-kun, who often quarrels with Yada-kun but actually always hangs out together with him, and who has a super beautiful mum. There is Sagawa Yuuji-kun and Oota Yutaka-kun from the SOS Trio. And Miyamae Sora-kun, who made his own airplane in elementary school.

For the girls, there is Shimakura Kaori-chan, who aims to become a pro photographer, and Okuyama Naomi-chan, who is once again in the same class as me. This would be the 10th year that the two of us were in the same class. That's worthy of a Guinness record.

And then, there is Nagato Kayoko-chan, who used to play truant in elementary school but changed in middle school and even received a perfect attendance award. Yokokawa Nobuko-chan, who aspires to be a novelist, and who was never once in the same class as me during middle school, is in my class now too.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

And then, somehow, my best friend Ai-chan, who transferred from Osaka, is in 1-A too.

The day before yesterday, Ai-chan dashed all the way to my house to inform me about this when she found out, even though she could very well have used the phone.

She must have been really happy.

Of course, I was super happy too, and hugged Ai-chan right there at the gate, the two of us jumping around together. The passers-by had given us weird stares.

But we were so happy, we couldn't help it.

And so, there are 11 of us from Misora Elementary in Class 1-A, including myself.

The largest clique in 1-A!

Haha, how did that happen.

As for the rest of the nineteen classmates, fifteen of them are enrolled in six other high schools in Misora City, with the remaining four in schools outside of our area.

I will be introducing these classmates in detail one by one, so look forward to that.

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## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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"Ehh, be quiet. We'll decide on the seating arrangement later, but for now, just sit in rows according to the class roster"

Those were the first words we heard from our homeroom teacher.

It was a hoarse voice that took some time getting used to.

But his looks were even worse than his voice.

His face resembled a reptile's more than a human's... Yes, he suited the image of a chameleon.

Missing an upper front tooth, his other teeth were stained like a heavy smoker's.

His hair was highly dishevelled, with a mixture of black and white.

His old man's glasses often slipped down his nose, so his eyes were always upturned. In addition, his suit looked wrinkled and shabby.

He told us that he was 45 years old, but no one would deny that he looked like he was 50 or even 60.

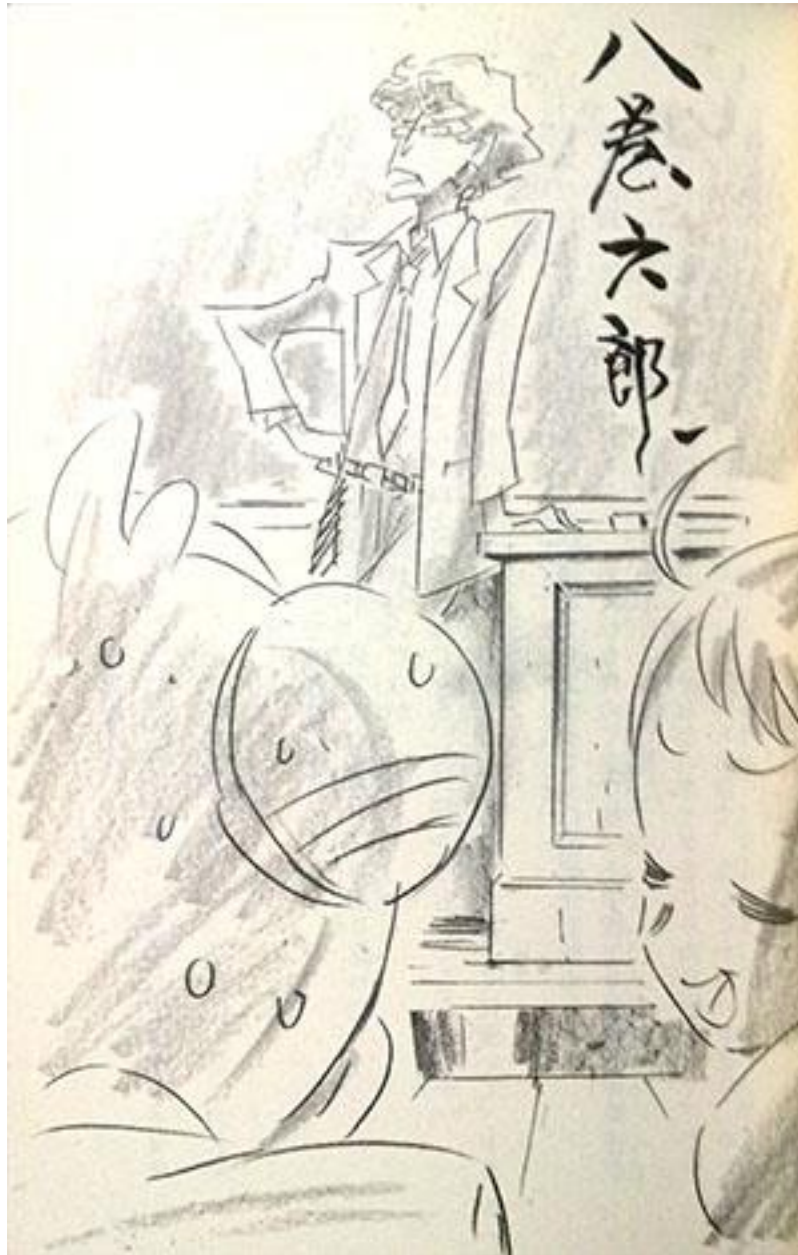
"Doremi-chan, looks like this teacher is a miss," Ai-chan, who was seated diagonally to my front and right, whispered.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"I know. I was looking forward to a hunky homeroom teacher, but this one looks like a creature who is not even human..."

Just as we were talking in whispers and giving wry smiles, the teacher quickly wrote his name on the blackboard.





## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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"Hachimaki... Rokurou?"

Hearing my voice, the teacher turned around and smiled, showing off his missing front tooth,

"It's written as Hachimaki, but read as Yamaki. In our family, my wife earns a good income, so I don't actually need to work as a teacher. She keeps begging me to quickly quit this job to focus on our home"

A few sniggers could be heard from the students.

Disregarding the noise, Yamaki-sensei continued his story.

"My wife is a beautiful woman, and she loves me with all her heart, so I'm torn over this issue now..."

H-he was joking, right?!

With a face like a chameleon, he sure could talk.

Is it normal for teachers to speak so fondly of their wives in front of his students?

I was not the only one who thought this way. All the students in class were stunned too, and silence reigned in the room.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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The teacher soon realized the situation, and hurried on, "I can't be the only one talking. Come, let's have an introduction session."

So saying, he pulled out a chair from beneath the teacher's desk and placed it near the window by the schoolyard, through which the spring light was shining. He then sat down heavily.

With that, the students stood up one by one and introduced themselves, following the order on the class roster.

With our biggest clique (laugh), the students from Misora First Elementary, including myself, soon got the excitement mounting, and we got through the introduction session with no problems.

Oota-kun and Sagawa-kun of the SOS Trio's introductions were sprinkled with stupid jokes, but just before the situation got out of hand, Ai-chan's retorts resulted in a bounty of laughter, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

However, Ai-chan, who managed to generate the most hype, suffered a big disgrace herself.

It happened during her self-introduction.

"My favourite things are the Hanshin Tigers (1) and takoyaki"

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1: The [Yomiuri Giants](#) from Tokyo and [Hanshin Tigers](#) from Kansai are two of the strongest baseball teams in Japan. As expected, rivalry among fans of both fans is big.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Ai-chan declared in her native Osaka dialect, and Yamaki-sensei, who had been basking in the sunlight with his eyes closed, listening, suddenly opened his eyes wide.

"Senoo, I am a super big Giants fan," he said, glaring at Ai-chan.

As expected of Ai-chan, she replied to the teacher she had just met, "What are you saying! You fool!"

When no retort came, Ai-chan got flustered. "What is my mouth saying?! I'm an idiot, an idiot"

So saying, she twisted her own ear, "hey, that's my ear!"

Even this over-the-top joke, so unlike her usual self, could not generate any laughs, and silence descended upon the room.

~~~~~

"This won't do. I can't get along with that sensei."

Ai-chan remained depressed throughout the entrance ceremony, muttering to herself.

"But we need to go get his approval for our part-time job after the ceremony..." I whispered.

Without delay, Ai-chan replied, "I'll pass. Doremi-chan, get his approval for me too"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"That's not possible. I just heard from Yada-kun that we need to get the approval form from our teacher directly and fill in some stuff, before we can receive the approval stamp from the teacher in-charge of part-time jobs"

Yada-kun would be starting to work as a waiter at a jazz club called "Bird" from this spring onwards.

By the way, "Bird" does not refer to the flying animal, but is the nickname of a famous American jazz saxophonist named Charlie Parker.

I learnt that from Dad, who was a loyal customer of "Bird"...

"What, that's complicated. What should I do?"

Ai-chan shook her head and let out a huge sigh, ignoring the principal and guests' speeches.

"Ai-chan, just think of how we used to help out at MAHO-do during our elementary days. This is no big deal compared to that"

With my encouragement, Ai-chan lifted her head and murmured in a nostalgic voice, "You've said it. We used to meet with so many complex and tough problems"

Yes, it was truly tough.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

Regardless of whether we were paid to work then, parents or teachers wouldn't have allowed elementary school kids like us to work at a store after school and during our holidays.

Nonetheless, we had turned storeowner Majorika into a witch frog, so we got Grandma Majoririka, who brought Majorika up, to stand in as storeowner to meet up with and convince our homeroom teacher Seki-sensei and all our parents.

Seki-sensei and our parents were worried at first, but watching how we matured at the MAHO-do, they soon understood.

That's why I managed to convince Dad and Mum to let me work at MAHO-do again so easily.

However, the problem now was Yamaki-sensei.

"What should I do if he rejects my application just because I'm a Tigers fan?"

It was after the entrance ceremony, and Ai-chan was still lamenting.

"Why are you so hesitant? That's not like Ai-chan at all. Confront him directly"

Without permission, we couldn't work at MAHO-do, so there was nothing left to do but to try.

~~~~~

And so, after the entrance ceremony, I grabbed Ai-chan by the arm and pulled her to see Yamaki-sensei at the staffroom.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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"Sensei, we'd like to get part-time jobs, and are here to seek permission..."

Just as I was speaking, Yamaki-sensei interrupted with a sigh. "This is really impossible"

"Ehhhhh—?!"

"I-it can't be..."

Shocked, we stared at each other, when suddenly, Yamaki-sensei pulled open his desk drawer and grabbed a round, dark blue case.

"I'm sorry, please follow me"

So saying, he left the staffroom.

We had no choice but to reluctantly follow behind him.

~~~~~

Cigarette smoke drifted lazily up into the blue sky.

Yamaki-sensei had brought us up to the rooftop of the school building.

Here he was, happily sucking on an unfiltered "Peace" brand cigarette, known for its super high nicotine content.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"Why can't we have part-time jobs?!" Ai-chan asked directly, with a slightly angry look on her face.

"Hmm? What are you talking about?" Yamaki-sensei returned the question, tapping cigarette ash into a portable ashtray.

"What do you mean, what?..."

Seeing Ai-chan's confused face, I spoke up helpfully. "When we said that we wished to seek permission to get part-time jobs, sensei told us that it was "really impossible", didn't you?"

After I finished explaining, Yamaki-sensei looked as if he might burst out laughing, but it turned into a violent coughing fit instead.

"Sensei, are you alright?!" Panicked, Ai-chan patted him on the back.

Reigning in his cough, Yamaki-sensei thanked Ai-chan, before continuing with a really weird laugh, "I meant that this was impossible. This"

He showed us his cigarette, before sucking on it with delight again.

"Huh?"

We tilted our heads to one side, not understanding.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"My wife, the principal and the other teachers keep telling me to stop smoking, it's so annoying. I've not had a smoke since this morning, and I just couldn't take it anymore..."

"Oh! So that was what's impossible"

"I see! Seriously, sensei..."

"Sorry, sorry. Quitting is impossible for me. This has been with me even longer than my wife has"

Pulling another cigarette out of its case, Yamaki-sensei lit up again.

Even with a "No Smoking" declaration...

Even Dad gave up smoking when I was born.

You are a teacher, right?

This guy is really impossible...

With that in mind, I heard Ai-chan ask, "so, what about our part-time jobs?"

"I will fill out the application form for you to recommend it, so that's OK"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

Breathing a sigh of relief, we waited for Yamaki-sensei to finish up his cigarette, before returning to the staffroom to receive our application forms.

"We'd like to start work tomorrow..."

To my question, Yamaki-sensei brusquely replied, "just get the in-charge's name, address and stamp before the last lesson tomorrow, and you'll be fine"

With that, he seemed to forget about our existence as he tore off the "No Smoking" sign stuck on his desk's bookends, crushed it into a ball and tossed it into the bin.

With a stunned face, Ai-chan shrugged her shoulders and looked at me, as if to say "Let's go".

I nodded and called out, "so, sorry for bothering you"

"Goodbye"

Bowing, we left the staffroom.

~~~~~

"I knew it, I really can't get along with that sensei," Ai-chan said with a sigh as we were changing shoes at the shoe rack.

"Me too. A normal homeroom teacher would have asked us questions, such as "Why do you want to work?" or "What kind of job is it?" I voiced out my dissatisfaction too.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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"Yea yea. He was so irresponsible, and half-baked..."

Just as Ai-chan was grumbling, we heard a voice calling down the corridor.

"I plan to trust my students"

It was Yamaki-sensei!

Why was he here?!

"S-sensei..."

Shocked, we stood rooted to the spot.

"If you are working to support your boyfriends or to buy drugs, then it's a different story," Yamaki-sensei said, smiling.

"N-no way!" Ai-chan denied in a panic

"That's impossible!" I agreed.

"Haha, I was joking. People work part-time because they need the money. That's enough reason"

T-that's enough reason...?

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Ai-chan and I stared at him open-mouthed.

Seeing our expression, Yamaki-sensei continued. "Sensei knows that part-time jobs can be the start of delinquency, but it can also help you enter the adult world, learn about society, and earn some money. I think that having a part-time job is very reasonable"

Well, he can speak seriously if he wants to.

Noticing my surprise, Ai-chan asked, "sensei, were you looking for us?"

"Yes, yes. I forgot to say something to Senoo"

"Me...?"

"I've heard from Nagao-sensei, the teacher in-charge of the track club. You competed in a national 100m race back when you were in middle school in Osaka, and won a prize?"

"Ehh, well..."

Ai-chan was a little shy about this, so I raised three fingers of my right hand and said with pride, "third in the whole country! She's great!"

"Do-doremi-chan," Ai-chan blushed with embarrassment.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Seeing this, Yamaki-sensei let out a really weird laugh.

"You two make a good combi"

"Of course! We are best friends, after all!" I declared with even more pride, puffing out my chest, but I overdid it and tumbled backward.

"Watch out!"

Ai-chan grabbed me in a flash, saving me from disaster.

"Hahahaha, I'll take note of this. Harukaze gets carried away easily..." Yamaki-sensei laughed as he pretended to take down a note.

"S-sensei~!" I shouted, making a pitiful face and voicing out my denial. "I'm not that kind of person~," I silently added in my heart.

"M-my stomach hurts... Harukaze, you are too funny," Yamaki-sensei said as he rubbed my head.

And then, seeing Ai-chan smiling wily as she supported me, he continued, "Senoo, work hard at track"

Giving her a pat on the shoulder, he turned and left.

"H-huh?..."

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Surprised at Yamaki-sensei's words, Ai-chan stared as he left. Suddenly, he turned around and called out an unreasonable request,

"Oh, I forgot. Senoo, being a Tigers fan may result in you getting a bad report from me, so do switch to being a Giants fan"

"W-what did you say?! This isn't a joke! Who would want to be a Giants fan..."

Just as Ai-chan's face turned red in anger,

"Hahaa, I was joking. Bye." Yamaki-sensei laughed and left with a small wave.

"T-that was a mean joke..."

Exhausted, Ai-chan sank down onto the floor.



"Fufu, Ai-chan, you must be exaggerating, right? Your teacher sounds too unique to be real"

"No no. It's a true story, right Doremi-chan?"

"Yep. It's all truly true"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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In the afternoon after the entrance ceremony, Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan and I met up in front of the fountain in Misora Park, before heading to Segawa Onpu's house within the city.

Worried about how none of us were able to contact Onpu-chan, we decided that we might find some clue as to what was going on if we visited her at home.

On our way to Onpu-chan's house, Ai-chan and I updated Hazuki-chan about Yamaki-sensei and our classmates.

Hazuki-chan listened agreeably to the stories of our classmates, but opened her eyes wide and seemed to enjoy the story about Yamaki-sensei.

"I can't trust a sensei who is a Giants fan!"

Ai-chan made a fist with all her strength while Hazuki-chan giggled.

"Both of you were at fault... But Doremi-chan, what do you think of that sensei?"

Hazuki-chan asked.

"I... I don't know yet. He's totally different from Seki-sensei and all my middle school teachers, and he's not human too"

"Not human?"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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"He really resembles a chameleon!" Ai-chan declared.

"Oh!"

Hazuki-chan burst into laughter until tears streamed down her face, as Ai-chan covered her mouth in a panic.

"Hazuki-chan, you laugh at really different things from us"

Ai-chan said, aware of the dubious looks passers-by were giving us.

After exhausting her laughter, Hazuki-chan said with a huge sigh,

"I thought my tummy was going to cramp up with laughter. Phew~"

~~~~~

Chatting, we reached the front of Onpu-chan's house.

The gate was secured with a padlock and stout chain.

In a glance, we took in all the wilted potted plants that were lined from the gate to the steps, and the untrimmed trees in the yard.

"Doesn't seem like anyone is living here"

Ai-chan whispered. Just then, Hazuki-chan pointed to the mailbox next to the gatepost and said,

"Look at that, you two"

Letters were flowing out of the mailbox's slot.

"Ah, the postcard I sent is here," Ai-chan said.

"My letter too," Hazuki-chan added.

"Mine too. So they didn't reach Onpu-chan..."

When the three of us could not reach Onpu-chan via phone or text, we got worried and sent her letters and postcards. Now, we knew why we never got any reply.

Just what had happened to Onpu-chan?

Giving small sighs, we gathered up all the mail and slotted them one by one into the mailbox, so that they were not flowing out anymore.

"There's no clue here... What shall we do now?"

Just as I asked this, a voice sounded from behind us.

"Do you girls know Segawa Onpu?"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

Turning around, we saw a shady-looking man in his forties and a young man with a camera hanging around his neck approaching us.

"..."

We kept silent, looking at them with suspicion.

"We are not bad guys"

The man in the forties assured us as he held out a namecard.

He was a reporter for a women's magazine, a popular one we often saw in hair salons.

Without waiting for us to take the name card, he drew closer.

"You girls look like you're Segawa Onpu's age. Are you her classmates?"

Before I could even nod,

"No!" Hazuki-chan said.

"No no, we are just Onpu-chan's fans!" Ai-chan added.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"Eh?! W-what are you s...!"

Suddenly, the two covered my mouth and bowed to the reporters.

"Sorry for bothering you!"

Carrying me up, they dashed off at top speed.

The reporters chased after us for about ten metres, but they soon gave up.

~~~~~

We stopped running when we reached a children's park near Onpu-chan's house.

Hazuki-chan looked around as she tried to get her breath back,

"Hah, hah... I don't think they're coming"

Ai-chan, who was in the track team, was not even panting as she said,

"We should be alright here"

Panting heavily, I asked,

"Zeh... Zeh... W-what's up with you two?"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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"The magazine that those people belong to wrote a bad article about Onpu-chan recently. I just can't forgive that!"

Hazuki-chan, who was always calm, showed a rare anger as she spoke.

"I read that article at a beauty salon too. I got so angry halfway that I threw the magazine away!"

"Did they really write bad things about Onpu-chan?"

"It wasn't just bad. They wrote that she had been cast out of the celebrity circle because she was too conceited as a child idol," Hazuki-chan elaborated.

"They don't even know Onpu-chan, yet they wrote such untrue things!" Ai-chan raged.

"Ah, but that's... Erm... slender?... Not that..."

"You mean, slander?"

"Ah, yes, that"

"Doremi-chan, I think you should refrain from using difficult words," Ai-chan commented.

"Haha, sorry"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

I could only scratch my head in embarrassment.

"Those people must have wanted to get information from us to write another bad article about Onpu-chan," Hazuki-chan said.

"I see. So that was why we ran away"

I finally understood the situation.

"What is everyone doing here?"

Shimakura Kaori-chan, our classmate, was walking towards us from across the road.

"Ah, Kaori-chan. We went to take a look at Onpu-chan's house, but was almost caught by a suspicious man, so we ran over here"

I explained. Kaori-chan, who knew all the latest news, nodded quickly.

"Ah, I see him around often too. He hangs out with a young photographer, right? He asked me some questions before too"

"So you knew about him?" Ai-chan asked.

"Fufufu, who do you think I am?"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Kaori-chan's glasses sparkled as she spoke. Then, she dropped a bomb on us.

"More importantly, I heard that Segawa-san's family is selling the house"

"Eh, really?!"

"The woman who lives next door said that she often saw real estate people around the place..."

"Oh, so it's just a rumour..." Ai-chan let out a sigh of relief.

"Don't scare us, Kaori-chan"

I sighed in relief too, but Hazuki-chan glared at Kaori-chan,

"Shimakura-san, please do not speak of this to the magazine people. They'll exaggerate the story just for fun"

"Oh, OK..."

Cowed by Hazuki-chan's intensity, Kaori-chan nodded and left.

Hazuki-chan can be really reliable with these things.

Once she believes that she is right, she won't give in no matter what happens. She really has inner strength.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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After seeing Kaori-chan leave, we discussed about what we should do to search for Onpu-chan.

We decided to ask for Majorika's help to look for Onpu-chan using magic, and called MAHO-do on our mobiles, but we reached the answering machine. Since the store was closed today, I guess she had gone to the onsen or the beauty spa with Lala.

Next, we decided to head to Onpu-chan's downtown apartment, but we gave up the idea as we did not know the address.

"If that's the case, how about visiting Onpu-chan's dad at the railway company?"

Hazuki-chan suggested.

"That's right, Onpu-chan's dad works as a driver of the sleeper express train between Tokyo and Sapporo," Ai-chan said.

"The railway company's headquarters is in Tokyo, right?" I asked.

"Anyway, let's go and see!" Hazuki-chan decided.

"Let's go!" Ai-chan agreed.

~~~~~

And so, it took us nearly an hour to reach the building which is the headquarters of the railway company.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

After explaining our situation at the reception desk, the receptionist contacted the train driver and crew department, and arranged a meeting with one of Onpu-chan's dad's male colleagues for us.

"You girls came all the way here, but I'm sorry. Segawa-kun had transferred to the Sapporo branch at the end of January"

The nice man, named Ogawa-san, updated us apologetically.

"Sapporo?!"

We were so shocked that we could not say anything more.

Sapporo was so far away.

When we were witch apprentices, we could easily have gone there, either on our brooms or using Magical Stage, but now...

Even so, we really wanted to contact Onpu-chan, so we asked,

"Erm... Can you tell us where they are staying over in Sapporo?"

"We'll be glad if it's just a phone number," Ai-chan pressed.

"I'm sorry, but our rules forbid us from giving out personal information"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

Ogawa-san said even more apologetically.

We had no choice but to leave.

However, just as we were leaving, Ogawa-san called out, with his back turned,

"I'm just talking to myself here, but Segawa did say that Onpu-chan is doing well"

"!... Thank you!"

Giving a deep bow to thank Ogawa-san for his kindness, we left the railway company.

~~~~~

The evening sun was setting in the western horizon as we crossed the overhead pedestrian bridge near the nearby train station.

It somehow looked bigger than the setting sun we normally saw at Misora City.

We stayed on the bridge, watching the sun in silence until it had set completely.

"We didn't find out Onpu-chan's whereabouts in the end"

Ai-chan said with a sigh, leaning back against the bridge's railing.

"Don't be disappointed. We've learnt that Onpu-chan is doing well in Sapporo, and that's great"



## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Hazuki-chan replied with a gentle smile.

"Hazuki-chan is right. If that's the case, we just need to work hard at MAHO-do and earn some money, then we can go to see Onpu-chan!"

"Yep, that'll be great!" Ai-chan agreed.

"I agree!" Hazuki-chan added.

"Alright. Hokkaido is to the north, so it's this way, right? Onpu-chan, we will definitely come, so wait for us!"

I shouted at the northern sky.

"Doremi-chan, that's the south," Hazuki-chan corrected me.

"The west is to this side, so the north is over there," Ai-chan explained.

"Oh—!"

In an instant, we were laughing out loud.



Now with an aim to visit Onpu-chan, even the uninteresting part-time work at MAHO-do seemed worth doing. It is quite amazing.

When we first reopened the store, there were many customers who did not know much about magical goods, due to our three year absence. Therefore, our sales did not increase as much as Majorika had wished.

However, three weeks after our reopening, customers who knew about the old MAHO-do came to visit out of nostalgia. We also promoted the store to our schoolmates from Misora First Elementary, as well as to our current classmates, so it has become a lively place now.

News of the effectiveness of our lucky items, such as pendants and bracelets made from magical clay, spread by word-of-mouth, and middle school girls from outside Misora City also came to visit.

Hazuki-chan, who can only help out on Saturdays and Sundays, and Ai-chan, who comes in after track training, are in charge of making the items out of magical clay.

That's because they are good with their hands.

As for clumsy me, I head down straight to the MAHO-do after school every day and work hard at helping Majorika and being a salesgirl.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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By the way, even though Ai-chan made a fool of herself during the introduction session on our entrance ceremony day, she had received recognition for her activities in the track team, and had become a popular persona not only in class, but throughout the school.

In addition, she set a new record within the prefecture during the qualifier 100m race for all high schools, held at the end of April. She is awesome.

Her relationship with our homeroom teacher Yamaki-sensei is also laughably strange.

The morning after the Giants won the Tigers in a match, he stealthily placed a newspaper clipping with a huge picture of the victorious Giants players on it in Ai-chan's shoe rack. That was the start of their loyalty war.

"Nobody except Leon would do this!"

Ah, Leon is the nickname which Ai-chan and I gave to Yamaki-sensei.

Isn't that too cool?

However, it did not come from some famous movie. If you take "chame" away from chameleon, you get Leon.

Everyone in class is in on the joke too, and we often call him Leon instead of Yamaki.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

As for Leon, we told him that his nickname came from a movie, which made him really happy. We almost burst into uncontrollable laughter at that.

So, I will be referring to Yamaki-sensei as Leon from now on.

I am digressing a little, but Leon's childish act had hit a nerve with Ai-chan.

During that night's game, the Tigers defeated the Giants. The next morning, Ai-chan bought a sports newspaper that was biased towards the Tigers, then left it on Leon's desk in the staffroom.

"Nobody except Senoo would do this!"

That hit a nerve with Leon too, and their loyalty war is still ongoing.

What will happen when the two teams next meet on the pitch?

Part of the class spread rumours about there being a bloodbath. Pupuu.

Either way, there is no doubt that Ai-chan is enjoying her high school life in her own way.

~~~~~

By the way, Golden Week came in the middle of May, and one day after track training, Ai-chan came to the MAHO-do and sat down at the table with a depressed look, letting out countless sighs.

Chapter 2 "MAHO-do opens for business"

"Ai-chan, sighing will lead to you breathing out your happiness"

I said, curious.

"Ah, Doremi-chan... Sorry, it's nothing"

Ai-chan grabbed some magical clay and started moulding lucky items.

However, she let out another sigh before five minutes was even up.

"Hey, Aiko! The items won't be lucky if you make them with a troubled heart! Go home if you're not in the mood!"

Majorika scolded as she watered the potted plants.

"S-sorry..."

Ai-chan hung her head listlessly.

"Majorika, you shouldn't shout at someone suddenly without knowing the reason"

Lala voiced out what was on my mind.

"Ai-chan, did something happen in school?"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"It's not something terribly important..."

So saying, Ai-chan pulled out a college notebook from her bag by her feet and placed it onto the table.

The words "Creative notebook" and "Yokokawa Nobuko" were written on the cover.

"Ah, Nobuko-chan's notebook. So, is her new novel complete?"

Ai-chan nodded, but her expression remained troubled.

"What's with the notebook?"

Lala asked as she flipped through the notebook's pages.

"She passed it to me before Golden Week, and asked me to read it and give some comments"

"I see, just like what we used to do so often in elementary school"

"Well... This is totally not interesting"

"Eh? But she was in a combi with Maruyama Miho-chan in middle school, and they received countless honourable mentions from shoujo manga magazines"

I exclaimed, shocked.

"Nobu-chan sent copies of her original stories all the way to Osaka to me, so I've been reading them too, but this one is really uninteresting compared to the stories from that time"

So saying, Ai-chan handed the notebook to me.

"Anyway, Doremi-chan should read it too"

"O-OK..."

I took the notebook from Ai-chan.



The next morning, I walked to school yawning.

I had read Nobuko-chan's story which Ai-chan passed to me, but I took so long that I did not get enough sleep in the end.

It was not because the story was so interesting that I forwent sleep just to keep reading. In fact, it was the opposite.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

As Ai-chan had said, it was totally uninteresting. I went through cycles of reading a little then falling asleep, and before I knew it, it was already morning.

"Fwaaahhh~"

I yawned, wiping away tears.

"Doremi-chan!"

Ai-chan ran and caught up with me from behind.

"Ai-chan, good morning... Fwaaahhh~"

I let out another yawn.

"Don't tell me, you read Nobu-chan's story?"

"Pinpon"

I took out Nobuko-chan's notebook from my bag and returned it to Ai-chan.

"So, what are your thoughts?"

"It wasn't interesting at all. It's fallen one, no, two ranks from the time when she was in a combi with Miho-chan"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"I knew it. This is even worse than the ones she made us read before she got into a combi with Miho-chan, right?"

"Yep, you're right. Doremi the faithful dog appears in this story too, but it seems more like a rehash than anything. It could have used some freshness, and the story-clinching jokes were completely absent too"

"Well, we think the same. Doremi-chan, what should I tell Nobu-chan?"

"It'll be good for her if we can tell her the truth"

"Well, I guess... It's a little mean, but I'll do that"

Ai-chan gave a little sigh and placed the notebook into her bag.

~~~~~

The next day was a Saturday, and it had been raining since morning.

I closed my umbrella, looked up at the melancholy sky as I shook out the water from my umbrella, and entered the MAHO-do.

"Good morning, Doremi-chan"

Hazuki-chan was already here, drinking tea with Majorika and Lala at the table.

"Doremi, come here and drink some tea too"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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Majorika said as she added new tea leaves into the pot.

"Thank you"

Placing my umbrella into the stand, I headed over to everyone.

"It's cold today. Come, drink this and warm up"

I received a cup of Royal Milk Tea from Majorika, and just as I was about to take a sip, the doorbell at the entrance rang loudly.

I unintentionally spilt my tea.

"Hot—, hot hot hot"

Ai-chan, who just entered the store, was shocked by my shouting.

"Ai-chan, don't go around making such loud noises so early in the morning. Now I've spilt my tea"

"Ah, sorry, sorry. I'm in a bad mood, so I took it out on the door"

"What happened?"

"Well, I guess..."

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Anyway, have some tea"

Ai-chan nodded at Lala's encouraging offer,

"I'll have some then"

She came over to the table and sat down heavily on a chair.

Majorika poured a new cup of Royal Milk Tea, which Ai-chan downed in one gulp, but her mood did not seem to improve.

An idea struck me.

"Don't tell me, you had a fight with Nobuko-chan?"

Ai-chan nodded wordlessly.

~~~~~

Before she went for her track training, Ai-chan returned Nobuko-chan's creative notebook to her as she was cleaning up the classroom after school yesterday. She then told Nobuko-chan directly that the story was uninteresting.

When she heard that, Nobuko-chan gave a surprising reply.

"I knew it"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"What do you mean, you knew it?"

Ai-chan asked immediately.

"The me who wrote this was not interesting at all"

Nobuko-chan replied nonchalantly, which annoyed Ai-chan a little.

"Then rewrite it until it becomes interesting. Isn't that the logical thing to do if you want people to read this?"

"I'm in a slump. Maybe I should stop writing stories"

Nobuko-chan said listlessly, not answering Ai-chan's question.

However, that hit a nerve with Ai-chan.

"What are you saying?! Don't talk about giving up so easily!"

Now, Nobuko-chan was the one who had run out of patience,

"Ai-chan doesn't understand the pains of being a writer!"

"Yes, I don't! I also didn't know that Nobu-chan is so incompetent!"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

With that, the two parted ways.

~~~~~

"I think I said too much too, but I just got so frustrated..."

Ai-chan hit herself on the head lightly with her fist.

"I understand what Ai-chan feels. You just wanted Nobuko-chan to continue writing, right? That's why you spoke so harshly"

Ai-chan nodded at my words.

"Erm..."

Hazuki-chan, who had been listening quietly to our conversation, spoke up.

"What's up, Hazuki-chan?"

"I was just wondering if Nobuko-chan's slump has something to do with her relationship with Maruyama Miho-chan"

That's my Hazuki-chan! I thought that was a sharp deduction.

"Talking about that, the two were behaving awkwardly during last month's reunion too," I said.

## Chapter 2 "MAHO-do opens for business"

---

"Oh, is that true? But they had so much fun creating manga together back in 5th and 6th Grade..."

Ai-chan added nostalgically.

"They often hung out together even in middle school, and submitted their works to magazine companies under the pen name "Misora Komachi", " I said.

"But they've gone to different high schools, and they didn't even speak a word to each other during the after-party," Hazuki-chan added.

"I see. Why don't you go ask that Miho girl then?" Majorika suggested.

"I've been thinking about that too," Lala agreed.

Just when Majorika and Lala were speaking, the doorbell rang softly and a petite girl entered.

W-w-what! It was Maruyama Miho-chan herself.

Just when we were talking about her!

"Ah, Doremi-chan! I was thinking it might be you girls running the MAHO-do"

For a moment, we remained speechless.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Hey, you girls, it's a customer! Go serve her!"

Majorika's voice brought us back, and we dashed up to Miho-chan,

"Ah, Miho-chan, welcome!"

"A poster promoting the store was put up on a nearby telephone pole, so I came over wondering"

"Oh, I see. We were just talking about Miho-chan, so we were surprised when you came in," Ai-chan explained.

"Is that so? Well, what is the MAHO-do selling this time?"

"Magical goods. Pendants that make dreams come true, brooches that bring happiness, they're all really effective"

Hazuki-chan explained each item as she held them out.

Suddenly, Miho-chan interjected,

"Do you have magical goods that bring misfortune to someone you hate?"

"—!"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

Shocked, we looked at each other.

"We won't sell such things!"

"Miho-chan, someone you hate... Can it be... Yokokawa Nobuko-chan?"

"—!"

This time, it was Miho-chan who was shocked, opening her eyes wide.

However, she immediately regained her composure,

"I-I was joking. Maybe I should buy an item that can make dreams come true"

"That'll be this pendant. It costs 380yen"

While I received the money from Miho-chan and returned the change, Ai-chan wrapped up the pendant and passed it to Miho-chan.

"Thank you for your patronage"

Ai-chan said with a stiff smile. Just then, Hazuki-chan asked decisively,



## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Hey, Miho-chan. Why did you choose to go to Aogaoka Academy instead of Misora High?"

"Because Aogaoka has a manga research club. They also produce professional manga artists"

"Oh, I see. So why didn't you invite Nobuko-chan to enroll too?"

This question seemed to strike Miho-chan once again.

"—!"

Miho-chan appeared shocked again, but she did not bother remaining calm this time, and showed an unhappy face.

"Hazuki-chan, I have dissolved the combi with Nobuko-chan! Please do not mention her name before me again!"

"Miho-chan...!?"

Hazuki-chan could not ask any further, and remained silent.

"I'm sorry, but I'm leaving"

Miho-chan took the change from me, who was standing dumbfounded, and left as if escaping.

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"Miho-chan!"

In a panic, we ran outside after her, shielding our eyes from the pounding rain.

However, we could only watch as Miho-chan's back retreated in the hazy rain.

Returning into the store, we discussed the issue as we moulded magical clay.

"I didn't know that their relationship had soured so much," I said.

"Is it because they went to different high schools?" Hazuki-chan mused.

"There is nothing we can say now," Ai-chan said.

"And they used to be so close..."

"Is there any way to help them revive the combi?"

"We need to first find out the reason behind their quarrel. Let's ask the two of them"

"You're right. Doremi-chan, I just had a fight with Nobu-chan, so you go talk to her," Ai-chan said.

"Alright"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

"So, Ai-chan and I will tackle Miho-chan then," Hazuki-chan concluded.

"If we could use magic, we could have found out the reason easily, and helping them make up would be so much easier too"

"Doremi-chan!"

Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan glared at me.

"Haha, I was joking"

I laughed as I tried to cover up my blunder.

"You can't become witches, but you can still become witch apprentices," Majorika commented.

"The contributions you girls made to the witch world is significant, so I think you can still become witch apprentices if we ask the Queen," Lala added.

"So, shall I go ask the Queen?..." Majorika offered.

I wanted to say "That'll be a great help...", but I swallowed the words.

"We had decided to live life using our own efforts without magic. We surely can do something about this on our own. We'll be OK even without becoming witch apprentices"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

---

Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan nodded vigorously at my words.



That afternoon, Majorika granted us leave from work, as the rainy weather kept customers away and the store free.

Thanking Majorika in our hearts for her thoughtfulness, I headed over to Nobuko-chan's house, while Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan visited Miho-chan's apartment.

The rain had let up a little, but showed no signs of stopping.

Nobuko-chan and her mum were just returning from shopping when I reached the front of their house.

"Oh, Doremi-chan, welcome"

Nobuko-chan's mum called out to me.

"Hello. I came to talk to Nobuko-chan about something"

"Eh, me?"

## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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As if sensing something, Nobuko-chan said as she grabbed my arm,

"Doremi-chan, let's talk in my room"

~~~~~

After having some strawberry shortcake in Nobuko-chan's room, she started the conversation with a good guess.

"Doremi-chan, you came to talk about Ai-chan, right?"

Noticing that the fight with Ai-chan had worried Nobuko-chan, I nodded.

"I seem to have said too much myself. Please tell Ai-chan that I wish to make up with her"

"Yep, I understand"

I answered with a smile as I placed the plate holding the cake onto her desk, and shifted my chair so that I was in front of Nobuko-chan, who was sitting on the bed.

"Actually, I didn't come here today just for that"

"?..."

Nobuko-chan looked at me as she ate her last mouthful of cake.

Chapter 2 "MAHO-do opens for business"

"Well, Maruyama Miho-chan came to the MAHO-do just a while ago"

As I said this, Nobuko-chan's expression turned unhappy.

"Doremi-chan, I don't know what Miho Miho told you, but we have dissolved our combi. If you still want to talk about Miho Miho, I'll have to ask you to leave"

"Nobuko-chan, wait. I may sound nosy, but why did you two go to different high schools?"

"..."

Nobuko-chan remained silent for a while, then said,

"If I tell you about it, will you leave?"

"O-OK..."

Nobuko-chan propped her chin on her right hand as she explained,

"When we were discussing material for a new manga, Miho Miho seemed to have told me about Aogaoka Academy having a manga research club, and that we should enroll there together. However, I was too absorbed in the material and did not hear her"

"Eh, really?"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"However, Miho Miho saw me nodding, so she thought that I had heard her. But think about it. Aogaoka is a private school, right? And the tuition fees are much more expensive than the public Misora High. I totally had no intention of enrolling there"

"The enrollment score is higher than Misora High's too"

"That's right! Even so, Miho Miho is angry at me for not enrolling in Aogaoka. It was a real headache, so I suggested dissolving the combi. And that's the truth. So, I've talked, now please leave"

"Ah, but..."

There were still questions I wanted to ask, but Nobuko-chan had pushed me out of her room.

Just then, I noticed that Nobuko-chan had pursed her lips.



By the time I returned to the MAHO-do, Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan were already back.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

The two had successfully managed to gather the reason behind the fight from a reluctant Miho-chan.

Her story was largely similar to Nobuko-chan's. Miho-chan had talked about enrolling at Aogaoka Academy together, and Nobuko-chan should have heard her. However, Nobuko-chan claimed that she did not, then decided on her own to dissolve the combi.

"Arguing about whether she heard it or not is pointless now. Is there nothing we can do about it?" Ai-chan asked.

"We suggested that Nobuko-chan really might not have heard her, being too engrossed with the material, but Miho-chan was insistent that Nobuko-chan had heard her. She claims that Nobuko-chan is a big liar"

I was taken aback by Hazuki-chan's words.

"Ah, I remember the lies. After telling her story, Nobuko-chan pursed her lips"

"Pursed lips?! Isn't that Nobuko-chan's habit whenever she tells a lie?!" Ai-chan exclaimed.

"I know!" I confirmed.

"Which means that Nobuko-chan did hear Miho-chan talking about enrolling together," Hazuki-chan added.

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"She heard it, but pretended not to, and didn't enroll," I said.

"And because of that, she decided to dissolve the combi," Hazuki-chan added again.

Ai-chan interrupted the high speed conversation between Hazuki-chan and myself,

"Wait a minute"

We stopped and listened.

"Why did Nobu-chan tell such lies, just to dissolve her combi with Miho-chan, who is such a close friend?"

"That is strange. It's as if she had decided on dissolving the combi even before the enrollment issue"

"Why did she want to do that?"

"We won't know unless we ask Nobu-chan. Alright! It's my turn now to find that out!"

Ai-chan exclaimed as she made a fist with her right hand.



The next day was Sunday, and we received permission from Majorika to take a break from 2 to 4pm to go to Misora Park.

Hazuki-chan and I told Miho-chan about what Nobuko-chan had said the previous day, and had brought her to the park as well. The three of us hid ourselves in the bushes behind a bench.

All these were instructions from Ai-chan.

Ai-chan had heard from school about Nobuko-chan's habit of jogging every Sunday afternoon as part of a diet plan. I think she had planned to jog together with Nobuko-chan and ask her about the truth.

When we reached the park, Ai-chan and Nobuko-chan were already jogging together along the running track inside the park.

Ai-chan had planned to tire Nobuko-chan out and lead her to the bench in front of the bushes we were hiding in, then ask her about the situation. As they ran, she increased her jogging speed gradually to prevent Nobuko-chan from realizing the change.

This seemed to work. Nobuko-chan tried to keep up with Ai-chan at first, but then started to get tired and lag behind. Soon, she stopped running altogether.

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"Ai-chan, wait. I can't run anymore~..."

So saying, Nobuko-chan sat down on the ground near the bench.

"Nobu-chan, are you alright?"

Ai-chan lent her shoulder to Nobuko-chan, and successfully led her to sit on the bench in front of us.

While drinking the sports drinks they had brought along, the two started to chat.

"We're really sweating, and I'm glad that I managed to make up with Nobu-chan"

"I'm glad too. We'll need to thank Doremi-chan for that"

All was going according to Ai-chan's plan up till now, but...

"By the way, Nobu-chan..."

Just as Ai-chan was about to shift the topic onto Miho-chan, Nobuko-chan interrupted with sharp intuition,

"Stop! Ai-chan, I think you've already heard from Doremi-chan, but I don't want us to fight again, so please leave it. Don't mention Maruyama Miho-chan in front of me"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

Inside the bushes, I glanced at Miho-chan. Her shoulders were shaking slightly with anger.

Th-this was bad...

Hazuki-chan put her arm around Miho-chan's shoulders to soothe her, but I still worried that she might reveal herself at this moment.

"I know, but..."

Ai-chan tried to persevere, but Nobuko-chan had stood up,

"I'm sorry, Ai-chan, but I'm going home"

"Wait a minute—!"

It was not Ai-chan or Miho-chan who shouted that, but me, as I jumped out of the bushes.

"Doremi-chan...!"

Ai-chan slapped herself on the forehead and stared at the sky.

"What, Doremi-chan is here too? How nosy"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"I am nosy. I just want to know Nobuko-chan's real intentions! Why did you resort to lying to dissolve the combi with Miho-chan?"

"What are you talking about? I didn't lie"

Nobuko-chan said through pursed lips.

"Your pursed lips tell us that you are lying, Nobu-chan"

Ai-chan pointed out, and Nobuko-chan covered her mouth with both hands in a panic.

"In any case, I'm going home!"

But before she could escape, I opened up my arms and blocked her path.

"Doremi-chan, why are you so nosy, when nobody asked you to be?"

"Well..."

"We are not elementary school kids anymore! We are already adults, so no matter what problems we face, we can solve it on our own! Doremi-chan is being really tedious!"

"—!"

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

Nobuko-chan's words pierced sharply into my heart.

"Nobu-chan, that was too much!"

Ai-chan objected, but I interjected in a strained voice,

"I don't care if I'm being tedious... I don't care if you dislike me... But at least speak the truth to Miho-chan"

"That's enough! Why are you barging into other's hearts like this?"

"Because... I'm a fan of Yokokawa Nobuko-chan's novels, and a fan of Misora Komachi's manga!"

I guess I was too worked up, because I was crying without knowing it, and Nobuko-chan appeared blurry to my eyes.

"Doremi-chan..."

Ai-chan walked over to me and gently put her arm around my shoulders.

"Nobu-chan, I feel the same way as Doremi-chan. I've been a big fan of yours since elementary school!"

Nobuko-chan closed her eyes and hung her head.

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After a period of silence, she sighed and opened her mouth.

"Miho Miho is better off pairing up with another writer than to remain in a combi with me"

"Eh, what do you mean?"

I asked as I wiped away my tears.

"I heard it. The conversation between Miho Miho and the editor. It happened when we entered a manga contest and received an honourable mention. Miho Miho and I visited the magazine company to seek advice from the editor"

So saying, Nobuko-chan returned to the bench and sat down.

Ai-chan and I followed suit, sitting down beside her.

"We received great advice, as well as encouragement to work hard. Before we left, I went to the bathroom, and that was when the editor said this to Miho Miho, "Your art is wonderful. If you will pair up with a better writer instead of that girl and her forceful stories, you'll get a chance to debut real soon" "

"Y-you heard that?"

"I didn't know where the bathroom was, so I went back. To speak honestly, that shock tore my heart to pieces..."

Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

"Nobu-chan..."

Ai-chan laid her own right hand on top of Nobuko-chan's right hand.

Nobuko-chan gently patted the back of Ai-chan's hand with her left hand, and said jokingly,

"But if Miho Miho can become a professional manga artist, Yokokawa Nobuko-san doesn't mind being the bad guy"

"I knew it, Nobuko-chan is still Nobuko-chan"

Happy, I was going to embrace Nobuko-chan, but before I could do so, a pair of hands appeared and hugged her from behind.

"Eh?!"

Shocked, Nobuko-chan turned around to see Miho-chan, her face messy with tears.

"M-miho Miho...?!"

"I didn't know that Nobuko-chan heard that conversation. Why didn't you tell me?"

"That would have been uncool... Miho Miho had received recognition, while I was just a burden"

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"That's not true! My art is good because Nobuko-chan's stories are interesting and give it life. It's the result of our trial and error"

"Thank you..."

A smile had returned to Nobuko-chan's face.

"And then, that editor sent me a story written by some famous writer afterwards, and told me to draw manga based on that"

"Isn't that great?"

"It's not great! I immediately rejected the offer and sent the story back"

"Why? You could have debuted as a professional"

"I can't draw manga unless I am Misora Komachi... I can't be without Nobuko-chan!"

"Miho Miho..."

Tears were swimming in their eyes.

Ai-chan and I signalled to Hazuki-chan, who was crying behind Miho-chan, and the three of us left quietly.

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## Chapter 2 “MAHO-do opens for business”

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A week later, we got to read the latest manga by "Misora Komachi".

We were happy with the revival of the combi, but what made us even happier was that the manga was a masterpiece with the best humour.

**END OF CHAPTER 2**

"I can't eat anymore. Please spare me"

I complained as I rubbed my swollen tummy.

Hair crabs continued to parade before my eyes, one after another, aiming and crawling towards my mouth.

I had no choice but to eat the crabs, but more continued crawling towards me.

Soon, my firm and swollen tummy could not bear it any longer, and exploded with a boom!

"Uwaaaaaaahh!"

I was woken by my own scream.

"D-doremi-chan!"

I was on a plane heading towards Shin-Chitose Airport, and Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan, seated on either side of me, were covering my mouth.

"C-c-can't breathe..."

"Will you stop making strange noises?"

Hazuki-chan asked in a soft voice, and I nodded repeatedly.

Satisfied, the two took away their hands.

The passengers around were giving us strange looks.

"Sorry for the trouble caused"

Ai-chan apologized, head bowed.

"Doremi-chan, apologize too," she told me.

"S-sorry..."

I said as my head was held down forcefully.

Throughout this exchange, laughing voices could be heard coming from around us, and the mood lightened.

"Honestly, Doremi-chan. What kind of dream did you have?"

Hazuki-chan asked softly.

"Hair crabs were..."

I began, but realizing that I would just expose myself to embarrassment, I fell silent.

Even I was amazed at my single-track mind for making up a dream about their famous hair crabs, just because we were heading to Hokkaido.

So, why were the three of us on a plane headed to Shin-Chitose Airport? I need to go back to yesterday to answer that.

~~~~~

The women's magazine, whose reporter chatted us up in front of Onpu-chan's house the other time, had published a huge feature article on Onpu-chan.

They had analyzed the drastic fall in Onpu-chan's popularity, and claimed that the biggest reason was due to the movie "Zagaidon", a rehash of the big movie hit series "Gazamaddon", being a huge failure in the show business industry.

Back then, Onpu-chan had noticed the decline herself, and spoke to us about it. There were decent articles discussing the issue too, but also some inexcusable articles as well.

This article was full of pure rumour, but it was also filled with slander, talking about the family selling their home, and that Onpu-chan was concealing her location now because she was shooting a sexy photobook to earn cash.

Of course, we did not believe that, but we could not sit still any longer, and discussed the issue with Majorika.

She encouraged us to become witch apprentices again.

It was obvious that she wished for Onpu-chan to return and become a part of MAHO-do so that sales would increase, so we flatly rejected her offer.

In exchange, we asked for an early payday, bought tickets immediately, and took a flight out to Hokkaido.



Our plane took off from Haneda Airport at 8am, and reached Shin-Chitose Airport at 9.35am.

There, we boarded the JR Hokkaido airport express, and were jolted around for thirty minutes until we reached Sapporo. It was around 11am then.

Since I woke up at 5am and had an early breakfast, my tummy was already rumbling.

"It's still early, but let's have lunch"

"Ehh?! Didn't you eat a box of candy on the plane?" Ai-chan asked.

"I have a separate tummy for sweets. Hey hey, shall we have miso ramen? Or the Genghis Khan nabe?"

"Doremi-chan! We came here to meet up with Onpu-chan! We're not here to sight-see or to eat!" Hazuki-chan scolded.

"Hazuki-chan is right! Let's go to Onpu-chan's dad's company office first. This is no time to be eating ramen!"

"B-but, isn't there a saying that goes, "One can't go to war on an empty stomach"..."

Suddenly, the two grabbed an arm on either side of me and started to drag me along forcibly.

"W-wait! I'm sorry! I get it already, let me go!"

Just as I was crying for mercy,

"Ah!"

The two let out a gasp and stopped.

"Doremi-chan, do you remember that gait in front of us?"

Ai-chan asked as she pointed at a man with long curly hair walking in front of us, banging his walking stick.

The man's butt wiggled vigorously as he walked, even more so than the famous Marilyn Monroe walk.

"That gait, there's no mistake!"

Hazuki-chan exclaimed in excitement.

I remembered the gait as well, but the name still escaped me.

"Oyaji, it's Oyaji!"

Hazuki-chan shouted excitedly.

"Oyaji? Oyaji... Oh!"

I remember now.

"Oyajide!"

We shouted in unison, and the man, like a dancer, did an elegant turn to face us.

There's no mistake, it was the wizard Alexander T. Oyajide.

Oyajide used to be our rival with regards to Hana-chan, but he is fundamentally a kind man who loves kids.

Furthermore, he is a huge Onpu-chan fan, and is proud of his status as the Number 7 fan of her fanclub.

"Oh, you girls are Doremi-cchi, Hazuki-cchi and Aiko-cchi, right?!"

"Long time no see, Oyajide!"

We dashed up to Oyajide, rejoicing in the reunion.

"Oyajide, why did you come to Sapporo?"

"Not much reason. I was just worried when I saw this"

Oyajide pulled out the special feature on Onpu-chan written by the women's magazine from his shirt pocket.

"Are you searching for Onpu-chan, just like us?"

"Oui"

"So you've found out that Onpu-chan is in Sapporo?"

"I overheard you girls talking about coming here when I passed by the MAHO-do"

"Oh, I see. Since we are together with Oyajide, you can help us search for Onpu-chan by using magic. That'll be a great help!"

I said with a smile, but Oyajide's expression suddenly clouded over,

"I have actually tried to find out Onpu-chan's location using the magic in this stick many times, but there's been no response at all..."

"Shouldn't magic be able to do that easily?"

I asked unhappily.

"It'll be OK if she is in downtown Sapporo, but even magic is useless if she's somewhere outside the city"

Oyajide answered apologetically.

"So even though we finally came to Hokkaido, it was all in vain?"

Ai-chan asked, crestfallen, with shoulders slumped.

"But if we can meet with Onpu-chan's dad, we can ask him about Onpu-chan's whereabouts," Hazuki-chan suggested.

"Tres bien!"

Oyajide appeared happy with Hazuki-chan's suggestion, and even Ai-chan looked up hopefully again.

~~~~~

The railway company's Sapporo branch office, where Onpu-chan's dad was working at, was located in a tall building near Sapporo station.

The four of us entered via the main entrance on the first floor, and approached the reception counter.

However, two security guards took note of Oyajide's strange gait, and came over to inquire about his occupation.

"I'm not a weirdo! I'm the director of a preschool!"

"Which preschool would that be? We need to check that, so please provide us with a phone number"

In response to the guard's request, Oyajide answered honestly,

"It's a preschool in the wizard world, so even if you call..."

"Wizard world? You are a weirdo! Please accompany us to the office!"

They suddenly moved to capture Oyajide, and we all took off in escape.

"H-hey, wait!"

The guards started chasing after us.

"You leave me no choice"

Oyajide waved his stick, and a whole lot of pachinko balls appeared on the lobby floor in a puff of smoke.

He has used magic.

The guards stepped on the pachinko balls and fell with a groan.

~~~~~

Somehow, we lost the guards and managed to escape, retreating to a cafe overlooking the railway company branch office's main entrance to come up with a back-up plan.

We had already been associated with Oyajide, so even if we went to request to see Onpu-chan's dad at the reception counter, we would probably not succeed.

"Does anyone have any good ideas?"

"Even so..."

Just as I grumbled in a half-defeated tone,

"Wait, look at that!"

Ai-chan, who was watching the office building, shouted.

We looked over and saw the security guards from just now, along with various other company employees, bowing as a really important-looking elderly man entered a luxury car.

"Hoho! I can make use of that!"

So saying, Oyajide waved his stick and transformed himself into the elderly man who had just entered the luxury car.

~~~~~

As luck would have it, the man Oyajide transformed into happened to be the vice president of the railway company.

As the vice president, Oyajide entered the branch office building and found out that Onpu-chan's dad would be driving the sleeper express train out from Sapporo station this evening. After learning that, he returned to us.

Since we had much time to waste before the departure time of the sleeper express train, Oyajide gave us a treat and we enjoyed a Genghis Khan hot pot with relish.



We decided to talk to Onpu-chan's dad on the platform of Sapporo station where the sleeper express was parked, before he went into the driver's compartment.

About twenty minutes before the train's departure, Onpu-chan's dad finally appeared on the platform.

"Onpu-chan's dad!"

Oyajide watched us from a distance, in case he was mistaken for a weirdo again.

"Ah, you are... Doremi-chan, Hazuki-chan, and Aiko-chan!"

"Long time no see, uncle"

After greetings were exchanged, we explained that we had traveled here to see if Onpu-chan was well.

"Sorry for making you girls come over here specially"

"Is Onpu-chan well?"

Onpu-chan's dad's expression faltered for a moment before he replied,

"...Ah, she pretends to be well in front of me, but so many things have happened..."

"So many things...?"

Hazuki-chan asked, but Onpu-chan's dad did not answer her, and changed the topic.

"Onpu was very concerned about not being able to speak to you girls about moving to Hokkaido, nor to inform you about her new phone number and e-mail address"

"Yea, we couldn't reach her at all," Ai-chan said.

"The media has been really crazy lately. I think Onpu doesn't wish to bother you girls with it until the whole thing has settled down. So please give her some time"

So saying, Onpu-chan's dad bowed. Just then, the assistant driver of the sleeper express, who was in the driver's compartment, announced that the train would be departing soon.

Onpu-chan's dad gave us a nod and headed towards the driver's compartment. However, he suddenly stopped.

"Onpu is living with her mum now in Wakkanai(1), so please don't worry about her. Bye"

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1. Doremi's joke is based a play of words; she used "wakkanai", a shortened form of the phrase "wakaranai", in her sentence, making a pun on the place name "wakkanai".

With that, he entered the driver's compartment.

"Thank you!"

We gave a deep bow, then dashed over to Oyajide.

"Oyajide, we've found out Onpu-chan's location!" Ai-chan announced.

"He said that she's in Wakkanai!"

"Wakkanai? No wonder we couldn't find her using magic!"

My old man's joke caused Hazuki-chan to laugh out.

"Can't be helped"

Ai-chan immediately retorted, but Oyajide, being an uncle, showed no response.

"Oyajide, use magic to bring us to Wakkanai"

Ai-chan requested. However, what Oyajide said next explained why he did not laugh at my joke.

"I'm sorry, everyone, but it's time-out. I need to return to the wizard world now"



Oyajide was referring to his preschool in the wizard world. Recently, the wizard penpen grass had been lively, and many wizard babies were being born one after another. There was thus a shortage of nannies, so Oyajide could only take a half day off today.

"Us too. We'll be late for our flight if we don't head over to Shin-Chitose Airport soon"

Hazuki-chan said with regret.

In the end, we parted from Oyajide at Sapporo station and, with feelings of painful reluctance at not being able to go to Wakkanai, boarded a train for Shin-Chitose Airport.

~~~~~

At Shin-Chitose Airport, we received another shock.

Just as we were going through the departure procedures, we spotted the reporter from that women's magazine emerge from the arrival gate.

"W-why is he here...?"

"It'll be bad if he sees us. Let's hide our faces"

Following Hazuki-chan's instruction, we managed to evade the reporter.

"What is he doing here?"

I whispered as I glared at the reporter's retreating back.

"He must have found out that Onpu-chan is in Hokkaido," Hazuki-chan guessed.

"It'll be a matter of time before he finds her..." Ai-chan warned.

So saying, the two chewed on their bottom lips.



On the return flight, and during the ride towards home from Haneda Airport in Hazuki-chan's dad's car, we barely said a word.

We were all regretting the fact that we only took a day trip out to Hokkaido.

If we had stayed for one more day, we could have gone to see Onpu-chan...

However, when the car entered Misora City, we noticed the moon glittering in the night sky, and we all spoke at once.

"It's the smiling moon!"

The smiling moon occurs when the moon, going through its lunar cycle, wanes to a point where it looks like a smile. On nights with a smiling moon, the human and witch worlds would link up, and even normal humans could travel to the witch world.

We looked at each other.

There was no need for words.

We needed to find Onpu-chan before that reporter.

And to do that, we had decided to become witch apprentices.



The door at the back of MAHO-do does not lead into a backyard, but on to a long road that stretches far away to the witch world.

Just think of it as a supernatural occurrence which only happens on nights with a smiling moon.

Once here, one just gets a strange and wondrous feeling.

Space is warped here, with piano keys and music scores floating around. Surreal is the perfect word to describe it.

We walked through this surreal scenery.

In the past, we used to be able to fly straight to the Queen's palace on our brooms, but walking on foot does take a lot more time.

However, we made use of the time to discuss various things along the way, so it wasn't a waste.

Three years ago, we rejected the chance given by the Queen and witches' senate to become witches without any hesitation. However, we were now returning to become witch apprentices, so we needed to be prepared. We might want to find Onpu-chan really badly, but we must not use magic recklessly, so we decided on some rules of our own.

~~~~~

In the end, we walked for an hour before reaching the palace, where we sought an audience with the Queen.

Majorika and Lala, who had reached before us, had already explained our situation to the Queen and the witches' senate, so after exchanging greetings, the Queen's advisor Majorin brought out the apprentice taps.

My eyes sparkled when I saw the taps.

"Wah, it's the apprentice taps!" Hazuki-chan exclaimed.

"Are they normally this small?" I asked.

"Don't be silly. The tap is not small, it's just that we've grown bigger." Ai-chan explained.

"Haha, that's true"

Just then, the Queen smiled and spoke,

"Come, take it"

"Is it really alright that we become witch apprentices?"

"For better or for worse, you girls are the saviours of the witch world. Of course it's alright"

That's right, the Queen had applauded our efforts at waking Majotourbillon, the Queen from two reigns ago who had fallen in love with a human youth and went into a long sleep after being besieged by sorrow, and dissolving the witch frog curse which she had cast.

"Come, take it," the Queen coaxed us again.

Just then, Hazuki-chan, who had been listening with her head bowed, looked up at the Queen.

"Queen, before we accept the taps, will you listen to our request?"

The Queen nodded, and Hazuki-chan continued,

"While we were walking here, we had a serious discussion about us becoming witch apprentices"

Ai-chan then lifted her head and added,

"We have set a rule for ourselves"

"Rule?"

The witches of the senate, who were standing to the Queen's left and right, asked in shocked voices.

We then explained,

"Magic can be really useful, right? We often think about using it to make life easier for ourselves, right?"

The Queen smiled hesitantly, unsure of our intention.

"Furthermore, we had rejected the chance to become witches once," I said.

"We feel that that was a little selfish on our parts," Ai-chan added.

"That's why, even if we become witch apprentices, we hope to never use magic for our own benefit," Hazuki-chan concluded with a serious look on her face.

The Queen finally understood us, and nodded agreeably,

"I see. In other words, you will only use magic to benefit others, right?"

"Yes!"

We answered loudly.

"I understand. So, if you use magic for your own benefit..."

"Then change us into witch frogs or something," I stated decisively.

Just then, Majorika, who was standing behind us and waiting to speak, spoke up,

"Are you really OK with that?"

We turned around and nodded.

"But Doremi-chan may use it for her own benefit before we even know it," Lala said worriedly.

Gasp!

I winced at her comment.

"The witch frog curse can only be cast by the Queen from two reigns ago, so let's do this instead. The moment any one of you girls uses magic for her own benefit, all three magical taps of yours will be destroyed. How about that?"

We looked at each other before nodding,

"Let's settle on that," we answered in unison.

The Queen nodded in satisfaction and called for Majorin. Then she started to chant as she held her right hand over the three apprentice taps.

The next moment, the three taps started to glow.

The glow soon vanished, and Majorin brought the taps before us again.

"Come, take them"

We nodded and took the taps one by one.

"Do you know how to use them?" Majorin asked calmly.

"Just press the button in the middle, and the apprentice uniform will appear, right?"

"Yes. However, if you just press the tap's button, a child-sized apprentice uniform will appear. So when you press the button, imagine the apprentice uniform fitting onto your current body, and a uniform fitting your image will appear"



Majorin explained, but I was too set on becoming a witch apprentice that I did not hear her, and pressed the button in the middle of the tap.

An apprentice uniform immediately flew out of the tap.

Yes, it's transformation time!

I need to finish changing before the music playing from the tap ends.

However—,

"Eh?! W-what?! My head can't fit in!"

Even so, I forced my head through, and somehow managed to finish changing, but,

"Doremi-chan, your underwear is showing," Ai-chan pointed out.

"Eh?! Uwaaaahh, why?!"

Watching me panic, Hazuki-chan sighed,

"Doremi-chan, you really don't listen to what others say, do you? Majorin-san told us to imagine the apprentice uniform fitting onto our current bodies when pressing the button"

"Eh, is that it? Ha...hahahaha"

"Honestly, girl"

Amazed at my blunder, Majorika snapped her fingers.

The tiny apprentice uniform was sucked back into the tap.

"In that case, I'll do the change perfectly!"

Ai-chan closed her eyes, imagining the apprentice uniform fitting onto her current body.

"Alright!"

And she pressed the button in the middle of the tap.

A blue and cool-looking witch apprentice uniform appeared, and she changed quickly, lastly pulling the brimmed hat onto her head.

"Pretty, witchi, Aiko-cchi!" She shouted as she struck her pose.

"Wow, such a nostalgic phrase! I'll transform too"

Hazuki-chan, with the image of Ai-chan's apprentice uniform in her mind, pressed the button on her tap.

An orange and cool-looking witch apprentice uniform and hat appeared, and she quickly changed too.

"Pretty, witchi, Hazuki-cchi!" She shouted as she struck her pose.

"Uwaaaah, so cute! Alright, my turn!"

This time, I paid attention to imagining the apprentice uniform in my mind before pressing the button on my tap.

A pink and cool-looking witch apprentice uniform and hat appeared, just as I had imagined.

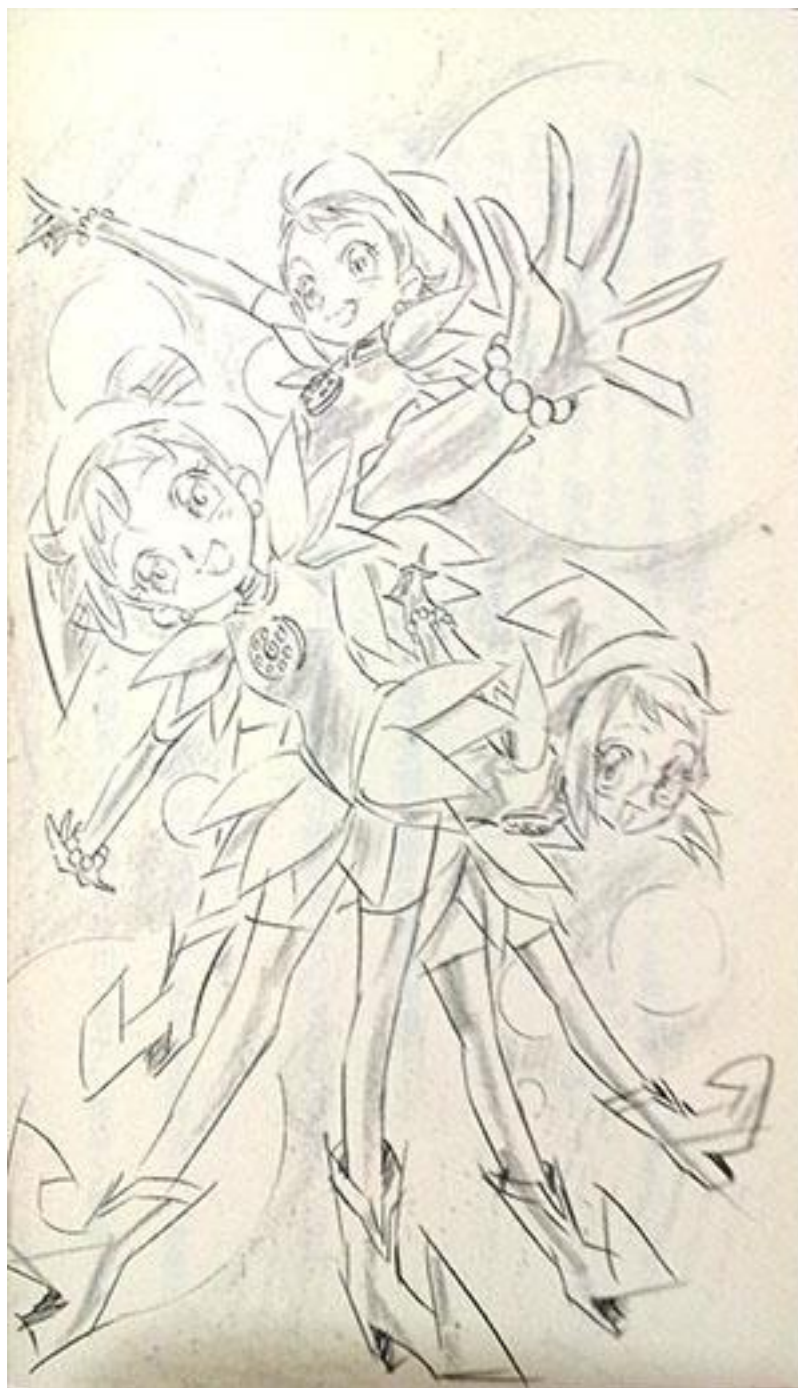
The size was perfect too.

Similar to the other two, I quickly changed.

"Pretty, witchi, Doremi-cchi!"

Having successfully transformed, I struck a pose. Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan headed over to either side of me.

"Witch apprentice, version 16!" We shouted as we struck a cool pose.



"Next will be the Porons! It's Do, Mi, So, Do, right?"

"Yes!"

"Let's go!"

We pressed the "Do", "Mi", "So" and high "Do" buttons on the tap, which was now on our chests.

Our respective Kururu Porons flew out of the taps.

"Wow, it's the Kururu Poron! I was so certain that it would be the Puwapuwa Poron..."

Hazuki-chan was right to be shocked.

Seven years ago, when we first became witch apprentices, the Porons that appeared from the taps were the Peperuto Poron for me, the Puwapuwa Poron for Hazuki-chan, and the Poppun Poron for Ai-chan.

Oh, the Poron is a magical item that we use to cast magic, sort of like a musical instrument. We could only cast magic when we put Magic Spheres into the Poron.

And then, the Kururu Poron was created by witch apprentices who had passed their Level 6 exams, through the fusion of their Poron and a beloved instrument. I chose my toy piano, Hazuki-chan her very first violin, and Ai-chan a harmonica that her parents bought for her when she was young.

Seeing our shock at receiving the Kururu Poron, Majorin explained,

"After hearing your story from Majorika, the Queen has decided that the Kururu Poron will be more convenient for you, since it can cast higher-level spells"

"I used magic to bring over your beloved instruments from the human world," Majorika added.

"The Queen did the fusion for you girls just a while ago"

We were touched by the Queen's kindness.

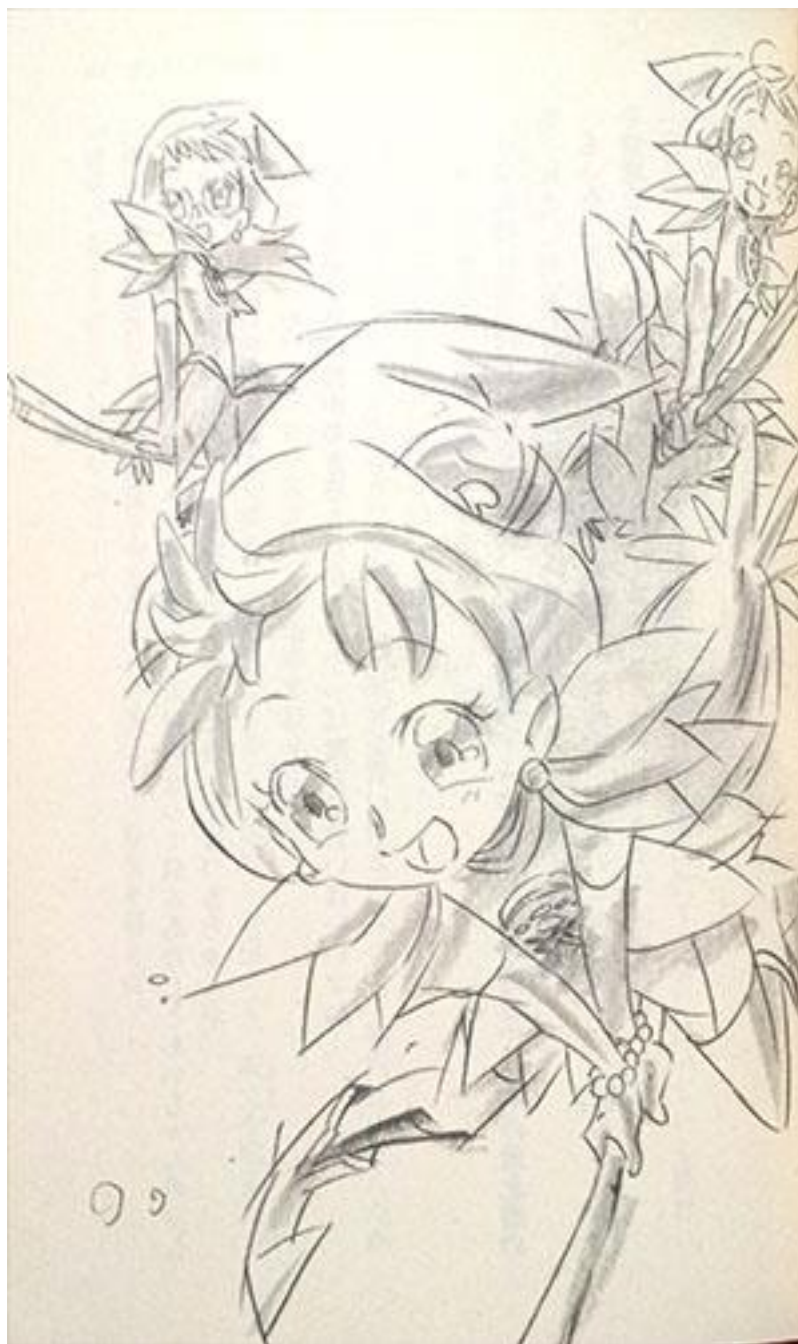
"Thank you for everything!" We said as we gave a deep bow.

We then left the palace on our brooms, with the Queen sending us off.



The next day, which was a Sunday, we left the MAHO-do in the care of Majorika and flew to Wakkanai, Hokkaido, on our brooms.

It was raining over the Kanto and Tohoku regions, so it was a tough journey riding in raincoats, but after flying over the Tsugaru Strait, the thick clouds parted and a clear blue sky stretched out.



"Yahoo—!"

"The broom is indeed the best!"

Straddling our brooms as if riding a bike, Ai-chan and I raced each other as Hazuki-chan followed a little way behind, riding her broom sideways like how she used to do in elementary school.

"This feels really good!" Hazuki-chan said with a smile.

Having such a wonderful journey in the sky; being a witch apprentice sure is great!



We left Misora City at 5am in the morning, and at 11am, after six hours of travel, we arrived in Wakkanai, the city on the northernmost tip of Japan.

Unfamiliar with the area, we made sure that no one was looking before landing on the roof of the tallest building in front of the train station.

"How shall we search for Onpu-chan?" Hazuki-chan asked.

"We'll need to use Magical Stage!" I exclaimed.

"We've already saved up enough Magic Spheres!" Ai-chan confirmed.

"Alright, let's do it!"



We quickly positioned ourselves to form the three points of a triangle and pressed the "Do, Mi, So, Do" buttons of the apprentice taps on our chests to summon our Kururu Porons.

"It's been such a long time, so I'm kind of excited" I said. Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan smiled and nodded in agreement.

"Magical Stage will fail if our hearts aren't feeling as one. Doremi-chan, don't you start thinking about steak," Ai-chan joked.

"W-why would I think of that!"

I might love steak, but I had become a witch apprentice and come all the way to Wakkanai, so searching for Onpu-chan was definitely my number one priority.

"Fufu, so, shall we begin Magical Stage?"

I nodded vigorously at Hazuki-chan's words, then prepared my Kururu Poron as I started to chant.

"Pirika pirilala, freely!"(2)

A melody played by a toy piano started flowing from my Poron.

Next, Hazuki-chan prepared her Kururu Poron and started to chant.

"Paipai ponpoi, flexibly!"(2)

A melody played by a violin flowed from her Poron.

And then, Ai-chan prepared her Kururu Poron and started to chant.

"Pameruku raruku, sonorously!"(2)

A melody played by a harmonica flowed from her Poron.

"Magical Stage!"

We shouted, our hearts as one, and rings of light appeared at our feet and rose into the sky.

In the next instant, the rings of light formed into a mobile and started to spin.

"Let us know where Onpu-chan is!"

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2. I've translated the Ojamajos' Magical Stage chants into English, so instead of "nobiya-kani", "shinaya-kani" and "takara-kani", they are "freely", "flexibly" and "sonorously" respectively.

As if in response to our cries, the light mobile formed a curtain of light and shone on us dazzlingly.

Just then, something fell down from the sky.

"Hmm?"

With a tiny sound, a calligraphy brush fell to the ground in the middle of the three of us.

"W-why a brush?" Ai-chan asked as she picked up the brush, her head tilted to one side.

"Maybe it's because we haven't used Magical Stage in such a long time, so we got a nonsensical item..." I suggested.

"I don't think so. Do you remember the first time we used Magical Stage?" Hazuki-chan asked as she pushed her glasses, which had slipped down slightly, back up on her nose.

"When was that?" I asked, unable to remember.

"When Dodo ran away from home," Ai-chan, who clearly remembered it, said.

"Ah, that was it..."

My fairy Dodo and I had argued over some trivial matter, and she had run away from home. We had used Magical Stage for the first time in our search for her.

"Yea yea, I remember. That time too, an item totally unrelated to Dodo had appeared, and we had to exchange it for various other items like some trade merchant before we were led to Dodo, who had returned back to my room"

"That's right..." Ai-chan said with a wink.

"So if we walk around with this brush, we will be able to reach Onpu-chan!"

I grabbed the brush and held it up to the sky.

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And so, we took turns holding the brush out conspicuously as we walked around Wakkanai. However, most of the passers-by did not show any response. There were some who gave us puzzled looks, and some who plainly pretended not to see us.

It can't be helped. We were a group of three high school girls dressed in our flashy witch apprentice uniforms, waving a brush around as we walked...

"Ahhh—!" I suddenly shouted.

"W-what's wrong, Doremi-chan?"

"Have you spotted Onpu-chan?"

"No. It's because we're still dressed as witch apprentices. Doesn't that make us seem weird?"

"You're right!" Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan looked at themselves and nodded in agreement.

We were like some strange high school cosplayers.

And this was not Akihabara too.

We dashed into an alley and pressed on our taps to return to our normal forms. Then, we started walking towards the port.

And soon—,

"Young lady, may I borrow that brush?"

The speaker was a man who looked about thirty-five years old, holding a convenience store bag in one hand.

"I've been wanting to sneeze since a while ago, but it just won't come out. It feels really uncomfortable"

"Ah, I know that feeling. Please use this," Hazuki-chan, who was holding the brush, passed it to the man who looked thirty-five.

The man inserted the tip of the brush into his nose and twirled it around.

"A... A... Atishoo-shoo-shoo-shoo!"

I thought only people from Dad's generation still sneezed like that.

I silently amended my estimation of his age to forty-five.

"Ah, that's a relief!" The man who looked forty-five said sincerely as he took out some chocolate from the convenience store bag in his hand.

"Thank you, young lady. Please have this if you like, as a thank-you gift"

The man handed the brush and bar of chocolate to Hazuki-chan and left.

"Well, we're like trade merchants again," Ai-chan commented.

"Just what will we get from this chocolate next? I'm looking forward to that," Hazuki-chan said excitedly as she held out the bar of chocolate and walked on.

Hey hey, Hazuki-chan, our goal here today is to search for Onpu-chan, remember?

Ai-chan and I looked at each other and exchanged wry smiles, then followed Hazuki-chan.

Then, we spotted two women, one who looked about thirty-eight years old and the other seventy, quarreling in front of the ferry terminal.

It was a typical fight between a daughter and mother-in-law.

We should let sleeping dogs lie. We pretended not to see the two women as we walked past in front of them.

"He doesn't like sweet bean jelly!"

"That's not true. He told me that he loves it"

"He just said that to make you happy. What he really likes is not sweet bean jelly, but chocolate. And you still went to buy sweet bean jelly"

The reason for their quarrel seemed to be the sweet bean jelly that the daughter had bought for her father-in-law as a souvenir.

Hazuki-chan immediately held out the bar of chocolate to the two women.

"Please have this," she offered.

"Oh, is that alright?" The mother-in-law who looked seventy said as she accepted the chocolate.

"It's too much if we just accept it. I'll exchange this with you if you don't mind"

So saying, she snatched the box of sweet bean jelly from the daughter who looked thirty-eight and handed it to Hazuki-chan.

"Michiko-san, let's go home"

"Oh, alright!"

The daughter who looked thirty-eight bowed in apology to us and left, chasing after her departing mother-in-law.

Watching them leave, Ai-chan smiled as she said,

"This feels good. This is Magical Stage working, right?"

"Right! Hey, Hazuki-chan, no one will know that we have sweet bean jelly inside the box, so let's open it up and show it off"

Hearing my suggestion, Hazuki-chan smiled and nodded, before taking out the sweet bean jelly from its box and opening up the bag.

It was delicious-looking chestnut-flavoured sweet bean jelly.

Just then, I thought I saw a shadow of some sort slip past us, and in the next instant, the sweet bean jelly had disappeared from Hazuki-chan's hands.

"Eh? Ahhh!"

Watching the escaping shadow, we made out a Shiba Inu holding the sweet bean jelly firmly in its mouth, running with its leash trailing on the ground.

Just as we were about to give chase, a voice called out from behind us.

"Chako, wait!"

Turning around, we saw an old man of about eighty-five, probably the Shiba Inu's owner, staggering towards us.

"S-sorry, little girls, please catch Chako for me!"

"You don't need to say that again!" Ai-chan called out as she started chasing after the Shiba Inu named Chako.

Hazuki-chan and I immediately followed.

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That Chako was a sly dog. Whenever we were about to catch it, it would dash across pedestrian crossings just before the light turned red, and purposely weave through walkways crowded with people.

Ai-chan, who was running in the lead, shouted angrily after it in her Osaka dialect, but Chako continued to escape, as if mocking her. Lastly, it ran into a large park and disappeared.

"Such a headache! The next time I see that idiot dog, I'll definitely catch it, stick my arm into its mouth and rattle its teeth!"

I understand you, Ai-chan, but that is not what a sixteen year old girl should be heard saying.

Just as I was about to retort,

"Eh?!" Hazuki-chan, who was catching her breath behind me, exclaimed.

"What's wrong?"

"I-i-is that...!" Hazuki-chan, with a shocked look on her face, pointed.

Ai-chan and I turned in that direction, and saw a bishoujo of about sixteen pushing a wheelchair while walking towards us.

In the wheelchair was a woman of about forty... No, this is not the time now!

It was Onpu-chan's mum, no mistake about it.

Nearby, Chako was eating the sweet bean jelly.

The Magical Stage had worked.

"Onpu-chaaaaaan!" We shouted as we dashed over.



"Ahh, you girls are...!" Onpu-chan's mama said, eyes wide.

Onpu-chan appeared shocked too, but a teasing smile soon came onto her face and she said in a bright voice,

"Fufu, you've found me"

I had not seen Onpu-chan for a year, and the devilish and cute child idol had grown into a beautiful young lady. It was hard to believe that we were actually the same age.

"Onpu-chan... You've grown pretty," Ai-chan, who had not seen Onpu-chan for even longer than myself, whispered as she stared in awe.

However, that did not matter to me.

"Why didn't you contact us?! You didn't come for the reunion too, and even changed your mobile number," I said as I hugged her.

"I'm really sorry. So many things have happened," Onpu-chan said with a glance at her mama. Chako, who had finished the sweet bean jelly, moved closer to us.

Ai-chan immediately grabbed its leash and pulled it back.

"What's with this dog?" She asked.

"The owner was chasing after it along with us all the way to the park, but now..." Hazuki-chan said as she looked around.

"I'll look after the dog. You girls must have lots of catch up on. How about going over to that bench for a good chat?" Onpu-chan's mama said brightly.

"Thank you, Mama. Let's go, everyone"

"OK!"

We gave a bow to Onpu-chan's mama, then headed over to the bench.

After passing the leash over to Onpu-chan's mama, Ai-chan dashed up to join us.



Having sat down on the bench, Onpu-chan suddenly walked in front of us and said with a deep bow,

"Doremi-chan, Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan, I'm sorry for not contacting you at all"

"After seeing Onpu-chan's face, we don't feel angry anymore"

"Thank you," Onpu-chan said with a smile before continuing, "even so, it's amazing that you managed to find me here"

"Well, actually..."

Together, we pulled out our apprentice taps from our pockets and showed it to her.

"Ahh! Isn't that the apprentice tap? Don't tell me, the three of you are witch app..."

Onpu-chan was going to say "witch apprentices", but hurriedly covered her mouth with her hand.

"It's OK. Even if our true form is known, the witch frog curse won't work anymore," Hazuki-chan reassured her with a smile.

After that, we started to tell Onpu-chan about our journey to becoming witch apprentices.

"All for my sake..."

Tears swam in Onpu-chan's eyes, and she bowed to us once again.

"More importantly, why is Onpu-chan's mama sitting in a wheelchair?" Hazuki-chan changed the topic.

"Mama pushed herself too hard and suffered a mild stroke"

Onpu-chan then told us about all that had happened in her life after she graduated from elementary school.

Onpu-chan used to belong to a company named Ruka Entertainment, which was owned by Majorika's lifelong rival Majoruka, but after Majoruka returned to the witch world, Onpu-chan's mama had no choice but to set up her own company and take on the role of CEO.

However, she pushed herself too hard at marketing Onpu-chan, and suffered a mild stroke and collapsed at the end of last year.

It was tough, but as it was just a mild stroke, she did not lose her speech ability, and was currently undergoing rehabilitation to learn to walk again.

"She has recovered such that she can walk with a walking stick now. Today, I happened to want to come to the park, so she decided to come in the wheelchair"

So saying, Onpu-chan smiled.

"It must have been tough," Ai-chan said.

"I knew Ai-chan would say that. However, I'm just like Ai-chan, and do not like people pitying me"

"That's why you kept this even from us, and didn't let us know your new mobile number?" Hazuki-chan asked.

"Not only that. The media has been really crazy searching for me, so if I had thoughtlessly given out my contact, I felt that I would have brought trouble to everyone..."

Indeed, this was Onpu-chan's thinking, so much more mature than ours.

"It's that irresponsible women's magazine that writes untrue things, right?" Ai-chan asked.

"Eh? Did they appear before you too?"

"Well, yeah"

"We wanted to protect Onpu-chan from those people, so that's why we became witch apprentices"

Hazuki-chan's explanation brought tears to Onpu-chan's eyes again.

"I'm sorry for being so much trouble..." she apologized, choking on her words.

"What are you saying! We'll take on all kinds of trouble for Onpu-chan, no matter how bad it gets!" I said.

"That's right. In the end, we are best friends," Ai-chan continued.

"Best friends... It's been so long since I last heard these words. It sounds wonderful"

Onpu-chan said as she enjoyed the light breeze which had started to blow.



"No matter when or where, we will always be best friends"

Onpu-chan closed her eyes and nodded repeatedly at my words.

"So, Onpu-chan, what will you do now?"

"Until mama can walk on her own, I plan to continue to stay here to care for her"

"How about high school?"

"I'm attending a high school here, and living at my uncle's place"

Onpu-chan's uncle was a relative from her father's side of the family, and Onpu-chan and her mama were living with them.

"What about your celebrity job?" I asked.

"I'm confused about that now. I've wondered if I can just pull out of things like this and live life as a normal girl," Onpu-chan replied as she averted her eyes.

"That's not possible! Onpu-chan is so talented," I protested.

"Doremi-chan is right," Hazuki-chan said.

"I agree," Ai-chan added.

Lifting her head, Onpu-chan joked,

"Thank you. However, I like the life here. Many people do not know about me, so I don't need to disguise myself..."

We understood that Onpu-chan was just putting up a strong front.

Also, we realized that it was only a matter of time before that persistent reporter found her, so we kept silent and did not say anything.

"Don't worry about me. I will let you know my mobile number and e-mail address"

Quickly, we exchanged mobile numbers and e-mail addresses via our phones' infra-red port.

Shutting her phone, Onpu-chan said,

"I want to think more about my own future. If I feel confused, I will contact everyone and we can discuss about it"

"Of course! More importantly, will Onpu-chan become a witch apprentice too?"

In response to my invitation, Onpu-chan replied decisively,

"I'll pass on that"

"That's OK. Onpu-chan doesn't have any reason to want to use magic"

"Besides, it is forbidden to use magic to heal illness"

As Onpu-chan nodded, I suggested,

"Oh! I just remembered this. My family will be visiting my grandpa's place in Hida during the Bon Festival this year. Will everyone come along too?"

"Ah! Is it that place which we visited together when we were in 5th Grade?!"

"I want to go!"

"Me too!"

"Papa will be taking leave during the Bon Festival, so maybe I can get him to look after mama so I can go"

"You're all welcome! Yay, yay—!"

We held each other's hands and laughed out loud as we jumped around, like how we used to do in elementary school.

**END OF CHAPTER 3**

It happened several days after we returned from Wakkanai.

Aaaaaaaahhh— I didn't knowwwwwwww—

I didn't shout it out loud, but in my mind, I was in the same pose as Munch's "The Scream".

~~~~~

Ever since entering high school, my life has completely changed. In particular, it started to get really busy, and the pace of my life seemed to increase.

I was so busy that, although I could remember the falling of the cherry blossoms, I could not recall what flowers started to bloom around our house after that.

I was busy with school and the part-time job at MAHO-do, but I soon got used to it. As I was so tied up with my own affairs, I felt that I was missing out on lots of other things.

"That's how it's always been," Ai-chan commented without hesitation.

Ai-chan is cool like that.

It's true; my life has always been brimming with events and happenings.

To think that I had been looking forward to slowing down and becoming a calm young lady once I entered high school.

By the way, about a week ago, Hazuki-chan came to the MAHO-do and greeted us with a "Hello". Hearing Hazuki-chan's voice, Ai-chan immediately asked,

"What's wrong? Hazuki-chan, are you feeling unwell?"

"Hmm, maybe it's just the period before a test? High school is just full of tests and exams."

"I know, I know. We just pulled through a really painful entrance exam, and yet we're still taking exams now. It's so cruel," I complained.

It was from then on that Ai-chan started to notice that Hazuki-chan was not being her usual self.

Sadly, I thought nothing more of it, even when I noticed that Ai-chan did not return a smart retort to my complaint.

"Ai-chan's track activities are tough too, right?" Hazuki-chan continued.

"That's because I'm a freshman, so there are lots of things to do."

"The number of my violin lessons have increased too, so I'm sorry for not coming to the MAHO-do much."

Then, Hazuki-chan was worried about what Ai-chan and I would think, so she did not say anything more.

But the smile she showed us was so weak.

~~~~~

The hydrangeas were blooming in beautiful colours; purple tinged with a lonely shade of blue.

It was raining today. MAHO-do was quiet with no customers.

Ai-chan and Hazuki-chan were given breaks from their track and violin lessons, so the three of us managed to get together for the first time in the past two weeks.

In order to cover up the smell of rain which had permeated through the store, we made tea and cookies, whose delicious smells that wafted through the air.

"Oh no, no customers will come in this rain," Majorika said gloomily.

We had switched off most of the lights inside the store, and the lack of sunlight even on these first days of summer made me realize how dark it truly was.

"Let's have a heart-to-heart talk, shall we?" Majorika suggested, and Hazuki-chan finally spilled it all.

~~~~~

The scream in my mind that I talked about at the beginning was because of this.

I was so unobservant. It had started during those days when we were searching for Onpu-chan.

"...It started with a few classmates who kept on sneaking glances at me," Hazuki-chan said with a sigh as she returned her cup of tea to its plate.

"I didn't know why, and they always looked away quickly when I spotted them. I've tried asking, but they never gave me a clear answer."

"Well, that's dubious," Ai-chan commented.

"Maybe they were just looking at Hazuki-chan normally," Lala suggested.

In actual fact, Hazuki-chan was being targeted by the Karen Girls' Academy's Ura (1) Site.

Those who had been with Hazuki-chan through middle school knew her well. A cute and reserved girl, she is also slightly an airhead. As can be deduced from her appearance, she is a gentle, good-natured, and refreshing high school girl. Therefore, we had thought that no one would believe in those rumors.

"Everyone knows that Ura Sites nowadays are just full of lies," I said.

"Everyone just writes irresponsibly to vent their own frustrations. They will soon tire of it," Ai-chan added.

1. Ura Site – "Ura" translates into "under". Many Japanese high schools have their own Ura Sites set up by students, which are kind of like online forums for everyone to keep updated on events and happenings, and also to trade gossip. One major problem with Ura Sites is that students use them as a platform for cyber-bullying, by spreading rumors or blatantly insulting the victim. [Read more about Ura Sites](#)

"Resorting to bullying to vent your own frustrations is just deplorable," Majorika stated, looking bored.

However, we knew that she was not as unconcerned as she appeared to be.

Majorika has always been good at hiding her feelings.

As for me, I had skipped school a few times too. However, most of those were purely because of personal reasons, such as not wanting to study for a test, or feeling sleepy because I had stayed up too late the previous night watching television, or when we had to run marathons during PE lessons.

It had all been for myself.

I felt that I had really been too easygoing. Misora High School probably has its own Ura Site too, but I was not interested in it, nor do I believe in the rumors written there.

And because that is how I was, even if I saw someone in class feeling downhearted, I would assume that it was because she was just tired, like me.

I did not even realize that Hazuki-chan, my best friend, was affected by it.

"Haaa~ I hate myself~," I said with a sigh.

"What are you talking about?" Ai-chan asked.

"I mean, Hazuki-chan is suffering so much, but I didn't even realize it. I just feel so pathetic..."

"Doremi-chan, Ai-chan, I'm sorry. I myself assumed that all this would blow over soon," Hazuki-chan apologized with a bow.

"What are you saying? There is nothing Hazuki-chan needs to apologize for," I protested.

"That's right. Hazuki-chan is the victim here," Ai-chan added.

Finally, Hazuki-chan smiled, but tears immediately started to flow from her eyes.

"Hazuki-chan."

Flustered, we offered our handkerchiefs and tissues to Hazuki-chan.

"Thank you... I just feel so relieved."

Hazuki-chan pulled out her own handkerchief from her pocket and wiped away her tears.

"We may be in different schools and not be able to solve the problem, but just come talk to us if anything happens. We'll definitely help you out!" Ai-chan said.

"That's right, Hazuki-chan! As long as we think about it together, we may come up with good ideas," I added.

"Yes..." Hazuki-chan said as she nodded repeatedly.



As the day progressed into darkness, it grew quieter and we could hear the sound of the rain. It had been more than two hours since we came to the MAHO-do, so Majorika encouraged us to go back home.

Just then, Majorika looked out the window and tilted her head to the side.

She thought she had seen someone passing by outside the window,

"Maybe it's a customer."

So saying, she opened the door, but there was nobody there. The sound of the rain grew louder due to the open door.

"It's totally dark outside, but it's not even that late yet," Ai-chan commented.

"You're right. It somehow makes me feel hungry," I added.

Hearing that, Hazuki-chan giggled,

"Doremi-chan, you never change."

"Seems like Hazuki-chan is back to normal," Ai-chan said as she gave Hazuki-chan a thumbs-up sign.

"That's right. You'll soon grow tired of me," Hazuki-chan replied.

"Exactly. Unlike Doremi-chan, there is not much to make fun of about Hazuki-chan, so my jokes just run out really quickly," Ai-chan lamented.

"Wha-... Ai-chan, that is so mean!"

We tidied up the crockery, thanked Majorika and Lala, and hurried on our separate ways home.

I wish for the online posts about Hazuki-chan to disappear. Looking up at the dark sky, I wished upon the stars hidden behind the rain clouds.

~~~~~

At that time, we thought that the posts on the Ura Site were just pure slander, and that all these unfounded rumours were just gossip that just happened to be attached to Hazuki-chan.

However, they did not disappear. In fact, more were posted every day.

"Hazuki-chan, do you have any friends in class who are your allies?"

"Yes. There is a girl who told me about this whole thing. That was how I found out that I was being targeted on the Ura Site"

The girl was Hazuki-chan's friend and classmate Mukai Riko, who came in from an external high school.

Most of the students who enroll in Karen Girls' Academy, especially for the music faculty, come from the affiliated middle school. Mukai-san, who was a frivolous girl, became good friends with Hazuki-chan when she joined the school and got to know everyone.

It was probably because she looked out for Hazuki-chan.

"Mukai-san told me that she definitely didn't believe in those posts."

"Those forums are just full of lies, so there's no need to bother about them," I assured her.

"That's right; you don't need to read those posts," Ai-chan added.

We felt a little relieved, hearing that Hazuki-chan had a friend and ally in class.

Since we were in different schools, we could not know what was happening to Hazuki-chan, apart from what she chose to tell us.

"That Mukai-san is a good girl, eh? Do introduce her to us next time," Ai-chan said.

"Yes, yes, I want to meet her too," I agreed.

"Alright, I'll talk to Mukai-san about you too," Hazuki-chan promised.

With that, we parted for the day.

~~~~~

This was what Hazuki-chan told us.

She has friends in class, as well as Tamaki Reika, even though she is in a different course. Outside school, she has us, her best friends since elementary school, and Majorika and Lala at the MAHO-do. With all this, she is happy.

The person who wrote about her on the Ura Site must be someone who did not have so many friends. That person was probably just jealous of Hazuki-chan. If they wanted to speak ill of her, they should have confronted her directly instead of doing this.

I am a simple person, so this was the only conclusion I could come to.

I myself had been envious of Hazuki-chan's talent with the violin, as well as of her family background, but I love my own family, and Hazuki-chan's talent with the violin was all due to her hard work.

As I grew up, I've learned to read kanji that I could not as a child, and subjects like English and classics had stopped sounding like nonsensical magical chants to me.

I may not know the best way to live life yet, but I had learnt so many things, and met so many people.

When I was young, I used to be envious of other kids and often said things like "She's so lucky" or "That's not fair" or "I want that, too".

If I had voiced my thoughts out, they would surely have turned into horrible words, like those that were now reflected on the computer screen, no matter how simple-minded they actually were in the first place.



Ignoring the posts on the Ura Site, Hazuki-chan attended school as per normal.

However, verbal communication about the Ura Site seemed to have spread around, and Hazuki-chan received more unwanted attention, even from the students of other classes.

Even when she came to the MAHO-do, Hazuki-chan was full of sighs.

"That's it!" Ai-chan shouted suddenly as she drew out her mobile phone. "There's only so much we can discuss among ourselves, and that's not enough. I think it's best that we consult an expert"

"An expert... You mean the police?"

"No, no."

Quickly pressing some keys on her phone, Ai-chan then pressed it to her ear. "Ah, Onpu-chan, there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

She had called Onpu-chan.

After quickly updating Onpu-chan on the situation, Ai-chan said, "Yes, it's that site. We feel a little uncomfortable with it. Hazuki-chan has been attacked, so we want to identify the culprit. Please help us"

Shutting her phone, Ai-chan told us, "Onpu-chan said that she will look at the site posts and e-mail Hazuki-chan about a suitable way to deal with the problem"

"Really? That's right; Onpu-chan is an expert on these kind of things," I said.

"Yes, Onpu-chan had been the victim of so many rumours," Hazuki-chan agreed.

We were satisfied with this conclusion.

At any rate, we cannot forgive anyone who writes slander about our friends.

"We can quickly resolve this issue with magic," I suggested, but Hazuki-chan shook her head.

"I hope to solve this problem on my own, as much as I can. I have Doremi-chan and Ai-chan on my side, and even though using magic will be easy, this whole issue may have arisen because I myself had done something bad. So please wait it out a little."

I agreed with Hazuki-chan's reasoning.

No real harm had been done yet, and the contents of the online posts were just unfounded lies.

"I understand, Hazuki-chan. However, don't push yourself too hard," I said.

"Thank you, Doremi-chan and Ai-chan."

After thanking us, Hazuki-chan left for home.



However, an incident occurred just a few days later.

"I don't want to go to school anymore," Hazuki-chan exclaimed as she threw open the door to MAHO-do, crying as she ran up to Ai-chan and me.

"Hazuki-chan, what's wrong?" I asked.

Hazuki-chan sobbed, unable to answer.

"Don't tell me—it's the Ura Site again, isn't it?"

Hazuki-chan nodded violently in response to Ai-chan's question.

"What is this?" Ai-chan exclaimed.

"This is horrible..." I added.

We borrowed a computer from Majorika and accessed Karen Girls' Academy's Ura Site.

The posts this week were not just limited to slander.

"It must be this."

A photo attached to one post showed Hazuki-chan and her boyfriend Yada-kun.

The photo was dimly lit, as if it had taken during the evening, and a love hotel (2) could be seen in the background.

"We just met unexpectedly, and stopped to chat..." Hazuki-chan explained the situation regarding the photo, frustrated.

Yada-kun had been on an errand to buy some ingredients for his part-time job, while Hazuki-chan was on her way home after a violin lesson. They had met each other along the way and stopped to chat.

"The post is full of rumors about how the two of you were caught exiting the love hotel!"

"You're right. Look at all these other posts, claiming that they witnessed the incident themselves," Ai-chan commented, her head tilted to one side as she read the posts fervently.

"What? Have you discovered something?" I asked as I moved out from behind Ai-chan to read the posts. Yes, there truly was something strange about the contents.

"All these posts seem to imply that the poster was following behind Hazuki-chan," Ai-chan concluded, just like a detective. She then stood up and paced the room, looking more and more like a detective. Turning around, she asked,

"Hazuki-chan, you don't spend much time alone when in school, do you?"

"No. As Onpu-chan told me, I've tried to remain in the company of others as much as possible."

With people around her, it would be easy to prove that the online posts' claims were nothing but lies.

2. A love hotel is a type of short-stay hotel found around the world operated primarily for the purpose of allowing couples privacy for sexual activities.

That was why Onpu-chan had advised her to stay in the company of lots of people when she was in school.

We also helped out by meeting up with her on days when she had to work, so that we could come to the MAHO-do together.

"The contents of those posts are just clumsy rumors. However, it seems like the poster knows that you work at the MAHO-do, and also your daily schedule," Ai-chan said.

"Yes. They also seem to know when you are free, and when you go out to play with us," I added.

"Even about Yada-kun too. Although the two of you had met up unexpectedly, they still managed to take a photo. I don't think Hazuki-chan even told anyone about him," Ai-chan said.

Someone was definitely stalking Hazuki-chan.

"And that's not all," Ai-chan warned.

Ai-chan was referring to the fact that the poster knew which road Hazuki-chan was going to take to go home after her lesson, and that she would leave for home right after the lesson had ended.

"You are being marked even on days when you have part-time work, and on your rest days too," Ai-chan concluded.

"Yes, yes," I agreed.

"Which means...?" Hazuki-chan asked, with an anxious look on her face.

Yes, all these information could easily be presumed, but only those who were close to Hazuki-chan would know so much about her. Aside from the days of her violin lesson, few would have known about her boyfriend or her part-time job at the MAHO-do.

We waited for Ai-chan to continue speaking.

"Time for a decoy strategy," Ai-chan winked as she gathered us close.

There was nobody but Majorika and Lala around, but it felt like a true secret strategy meeting.

This might sound bad because Hazuki-chan was the victim here, but I felt slightly excited.

"Get it? Doremi-chan, Hazuki-chan, I'm counting on you"

Hazuki-chan and I nodded.

I strongly felt that we would definitely solve this problem.

We promptly sent an email to Onpu-chan to update her, but her response was slightly evasive.

She said that to go searching for the attacker was probably not the best idea, but if that could stop the bad posts and the Ura Site, it would be for the best.

I totally agreed with her.



Two days later, right on cue, Hazuki-chan's classmates brought up a suitable topic of discussion, as she told us on the day of our part-time job.

They asked her about her plans for the upcoming summer vacation.

Hazuki-chan did her best to act normal and played along.

She told them that she had plans to go to the beach with some friends, and would be going to check out some swimsuits in the shopping mall in front of the train station.

Right after lunchtime, Hazuki-chan sent me a mail to update me on this, and I immediately spoke to Ai-chan.

"Alright, they've been baited," Ai-chan announced, just like how Dad would say it.

Either way, it was great. Now we had something unusual to do after school.

"Tell her to say something more provocative that can cause rumors," Ai-chan told me.

But aren't swimsuits provocative enough already?

~~~~~

I met up with Hazuki-chan after school, and we entered the shopping mall together.

Ai-chan was relatively unknown amongst the students of Karen Girls' Academy, so she just had to put on a pair of glasses to disguise herself before standing in a corner near to the swimsuit section to wait.

Of course, we pretended not to know her.

Lala tagged along as a back-up as well, disguised as a white cat.

Hazuki-chan and I chatted about random things as we held various swimsuits up against our bodies.

There were numerous girls around us, but Hazuki-chan did not recognize any of them.

And then, to make for a provocative photo, we moved to the corner where sexy swimsuits, which Hazuki-chan would never pick, were on display.

"Hazuki-chan, how about this?" I asked as I held a black bikini up against Hazuki-chan's body.

"Oh no. Doremi-chan, that's too sexy," Hazuki-chan, who was getting into the mood, replied with embarrassment while wiggling her hips.

It was then that we heard the shutter sound of a mobile phone camera.

Turning around, we saw Lala rushing over to the spot where Ai-chan was hiding.

However, Ai-chan quickly dashed past the section where we were standing.

We took that as a sign and quickly returned the swimsuits to their racks, hurrying after Ai-chan at a distance.

Ai-chan was chasing after a girl, who was rapidly walking away.

She was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, with a cap pulled over her face, so even Hazuki-chan could not recognize her.

As it was evening time, all the shops around were crowded with people.

"The culprit has escaped outside," Ai-chan called to us.

There was a large traffic junction outside the mall, and the people exiting the train station and waiting to cross the road were steadily increasing.

"There's no mistake. The one who took a photo with her phone's camera was a girl about our age. Either way, let's chase after her," Lala said.

We nodded at her words and dashed through the crowd, with Ai-chan in the lead.

"That's her!" Ai-chan cried out, and grabbed onto the arm of the girl wearing the T-shirt.

"What are you doing?!"

That high-pitched voice, and those overbearing words.

Curly hair under the cap. Yes, it was Tamaki Reika.

"What? Tamaki, what's with this fashion style?"

Usually, Tamaki would never be dressed this way, so it was extremely rare to see her in these clothes. We were shocked too.

Seeing us, Tamaki appeared flustered. With her arm still in Ai-chan's grip, she looked around us.



“...Oh, now look what you've done...”

So saying, she suddenly calmed down.

Then, noticing our gazes upon her, she continued, "What is it? What do you want from me?"

Ai-chan immediately let go of her arm and apologized, "Sorry, we mistook you for someone else"

"Sorry, Tamaki-san"

"Fujiwara-san and Harukaze-san too?... Just what is happening here?"

I quickly explained the situation, "Doesn't Tamaki know about the Ura Site? Aren't you in the same school?"

"Oh, that?" Tamaki asked as she looked at Hazuki-chan. "Those rumors are spreading through my class too, but I'm just not interested. Are they still going on about it?"

"It's been really vicious lately. We're trying to catch the culprit today"

Tamaki flicked her curls to catch the wind as she said, "Only a defeated loser would write about those things in such detail. If they have so much energy and time, they should just spend it on more violin lessons or something"

So saying, Tamaki left.

I felt that Tamaki was being her usual self, but in the midst of the confusion, I missed the chance to ask her why she was dressed so ordinarily.

Too bad... But there's no time for that! The culprit had escaped~

As I tried to get my breath back, I said, "Either way, we've learnt that there really is a girl following Hazuki-chan around and taking pictures of her"

Lala nodded.

Ai-chan, who was getting her breath back too, added, "That's right, she's working alone. As Tamaki Reika had said, we need to stop the culprit from writing more untrue things"

"We need to use magic this time," I concluded.

Hazuki-chan nodded in agreement.

~~~~~

We proceeded to the rooftop of the shopping mall and transformed into witch apprentices. We then summoned Magical Stage.

Without Hazuki-chan taking part, we got Lala to bring Majorika over to help us out.

If Hazuki-chan took part in the spell, our promise to the Queen to never use magic for our own benefit would be broken.

With Hazuki-chan watching over us, Ai-chan, Majorika and I shouted our spell with feeling,

"Protect Hazuki-chan from the vicious posts on the Ura Site!"

"It would have been better if we could just make the posts disappear," Majorika said.

We nodded in agreement. Ai-chan and I then returned to our normal forms, and bid goodbye to each other for the day.

When I reached home, I immediately turned on the computer. There were no new posts.

A mail from Hazuki-chan arrived, saying that she had checked out the site immediately after reaching home too. Her name was steadily disappearing from the site as new posts about other things came in.

That's great. This way, Hazuki-chan could finally get a good night's sleep.



The next morning, we managed to find out who the culprit was, but it was a fact that Hazuki-chan refused to accept.

Since morning, Mukai-san had looked sickly, and had finally collapsed. Hazuki-chan brought her to the sick bay, and there, Mukai-san had spoken out in her delirium,

"Stop... Everyone, Fujiwara-san is a bad girl..."

Not knowing that a concerned Hazuki-chan was just beside her, the sleeping Mukai-san spoke these words several times.

~~~~~

"I didn't want to ask her about it..."

Hazuki-chan, who took a break from violin lessons after school, whispered tearfully when she came to the MAHO-do.

Ai-chan and I went on to comfort her.

I mean, it was a name that everyone had probably thought of at some point in time.

However, everyone thought that they were probably mistaken.

Our magic had not only stopped the vicious posts, but the pain which should have been Hazuki-chan's had returned to the original culprit too.

However, we could not confirm that Mukai-san was the culprit just through magical spells, so we went to see her the next day.



Hazuki-chan called Mukai-san out to a park nearby, and we all sat down, Hazuki-chan directly opposite Mukai-san, Ai-chan and I on opposite sides of her.

"What are you doing to our best friend! Taking on an anonymous persona and writing those huge lies; shouldn't you know better about what's right and what's wrong?!" Ai-chan started ranting in her Kansai dialect.

"...I know nothing about that," Mukai-san obstinately denied.

"You were there 2 days ago, at the store selling swimsuits outside the station, right?" Ai-chan continued.

Mukai-san's expression changed.

"I was the one who chased after you. If you want to prove your innocence, show us your mobile phone"

So saying, Ai-chan quickly grabbed Mukai-san's phone, opened it, and pressed several keys.

"How do you prove your innocence with this?"

The phone's display showed a photo of Yada-kun and Hazuki-chan.

Most of the other photos in the same folder had Hazuki-chan in them too.

"...But..." Snatching her phone back, Mukai-san glared at Hazuki-chan.

"Fujiwara-san, you're too much. Why are you so blessed?! It's only fair that you suffer a little misfortune!" Mukai-san shouted as she gripped her phone tightly.

"But those online posts were so cruel. Did you know how much it made Hazuki-chan suffer?" I countered.

"That's right. Now's not the time for you to be defiant," Ai-chan added.

"...Wait," Hazuki-chan stood up suddenly and stopped us.

"Mukai-san, could you please tell me why you did that?" Hazuki-chan asked in her usual kind voice, and tears appeared in Mukai-san's eyes.

"I'm sorry... I knew I was doing something bad, but... I just couldn't stop myself"

Mukai-san finally started to explain.

Ever since she was a child, Mukai-san had always aimed to become a violinist. She had wanted to enter Karen Girls' Academy at the middle school stage, but her father's company had gone bankrupt, and so she had no choice but to attend a public middle school.

To help with family finances, her mother took up part-time jobs, and Mukai-san took over managing the household. Through her father's hard work, the company was reestablished successfully and Mukai-san managed to enter Karen Girls' Academy at the high school stage.

However, Mukai-san had already missed out on three years' worth of lessons. The difference in skills compared to her classmates who had been concentrating on their violin lessons the whole time, especially Hazuki-chan who had been her first close friend, was obvious.

Hazuki-chan had approached Mukai-san out of a genuine wish to become friends, and everyone could immediately see that she was a good girl, but that had stirred up feelings of jealousy in Mukai-san instead.

"Only the students who graduate with top scores from Karen Girls' Academy and receive recognition from university professors have the privilege of using those violins, right?"

"The Stradivarius (3) violins... I've heard that the top students get to borrow one to use as their own instrument for their four years of university education," Hazuki-chan said.

"S-Stradi...?" I fumbled.

"Stradivarius," Hazuki-chan replied helpfully.

"What's that? Something amazing?" Ai-chan asked.

Hazuki-chan gave a wry smile.

"It's the most famous of the famous instruments in the violin world. The best ones cost more than one hundred million yen"

Ehhhhhh—!

Ai-chan and I looked at each other.

We knew that violins were expensive, but...

"If I had one, I would secretly sell it off," Ai-chan said, and even Mukai-san smiled a little.

Thus, irritated and impatient at being left behind in so many ways, Mukai-san soon thought of harassing Hazuki-chan.

That was when she wrote a slanderous online post on the school's Ura Site, purely out of amusement.

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3. A Stradivarius or Strad is one of the violins, cellos, and other stringed instruments built by members of the Stradivari family, particularly Antonio Stradivari, during the 17th and 18th centuries. According to their reputation, the quality of their sound has defied attempts to explain or equal it. The name "Stradivarius" has become a superlative often associated with excellence; to be called "the Stradivari" of any field is to be deemed the finest there is. The fame of Stradivarius instruments is widespread, appearing in numerous works of fiction.



She did not name anyone at first, but after getting to know Hazuki-chan more, including her family background and part-time job, Mukai-san started to personally target her.

The posts slowly got more specific in content, and writing them helped to ease her mind.

"Your part-time job seemed fun, and you have such good friends and a cool boyfriend... All the things which I don't have..."

The posts slowly escalated and she soon lost control.

"Mukai-san, did you enjoy writing those posts?" Hazuki-chan asked, and Mukai-san looked up in surprise.

"The sound of Mukai-san's violin is totally different these days. When you first entered high school, it was a bright and gentle sound, but nowadays, it sounds really murky. You've sensed it yourself, too, haven't you?"

Even Hazuki-chan had tried to immerse herself in the piece when playing her violin, and not think of anything else, but she could not do so.

"Mukai-san, that's not right," I finally spoke out. "I don't know much about violins, but isn't music supposed to bring joy to people? If you don't play it with your heart, the music won't reach out to others, right?"

"She's right. It's only music when you enjoy it," Ai-chan added.

"That's right, Mukai-san. I'm not your rival. There are so many seniors and students from other schools all over the world. You've worked so hard to come to this school, and if you can't enjoy it because of small things like this, your parents will surely be sad," Hazuki-chan said as she reached out and took Mukai-san's hand. "Right?"

"Fujiwara-san..." Mukai-san held onto Hazuki-chan's hand with both of her own. "I'm sorry... I'm really sorry."

Teardrops flowed one after the other down her cheeks.

We decided not to pursue the matter any further.

We have already found out the reason, and as long as the posts stop, all would be well.

And most importantly, Hazuki-chan had forgiven her.

"It's getting dark," Ai-chan commented.

"We still have to work tomorrow," I said.

"I'll come by once my lessons have ended," Hazuki-chan said.

We stood up, as if nothing had happened.

"Mukai-san, you should hurry home soon. Your family will be worried," Ai-chan said.

"Eh...?" Mukai-san looked shocked at the sudden end to the conversation.

"Mukai-san may think that Hazuki-chan's life is filled with only good things, but that's surprisingly not the case," I said.

"She has troubles with her boyfriend and family too. We'll leave it up to Hazuki-chan to tell you about it. You'll be surprised," Ai-chan added.

So saying, we left the park, leaving Hazuki-chan and Mukai-san alone.

If the two go on to become good friends, they will have much to share with each other, but Hazuki-chan would probably continue to have a tough time.

Her family is so overprotective that it becomes restrictive, and Yada-kun can be a little uncaring too, either because they have been friends for so long, or because he is just shy.

However, she is definitely better off than me, since I do not have a boyfriend.

Yada-kun and Hazuki-chan, jazz and classical, trumpet and violin. Despite specializing in different music genres and instruments, they still share the same love for music, and that surely gives them things to talk about.

Furthermore, both aim to become professional musicians, so I'm sure that becoming true lovers is just one natural step towards those dreams.

Oh well, who cares about my opinion?

"Hey, they didn't have to say those things out loud..." Hazuki-chan seemed shocked by our sudden departure.

"They're great friends. Fujiwara-san seems a little different from your usual self in school too. I really do envy you," Mukai-san said.

"Mukai-san is my friend too. Can I call you Riko-chan instead? Do call me Hazuki," Hazuki-chan said with a smile.

"Thank you, Fuji... Hazuki-chan." Wiping away her tears, Mukai-san looked Hazuki-chan in the eye as she called her name.

Mukai-san gets to know another side of Hazuki-chan that I don't, the side of her that she shows at Karen Girls' Academy, and that makes me slightly envious.

However, it'll be great if we can become friends with Mukai-san someday.

The same goes for Onpu-chan. No matter how far apart we are, friends will remain friends.

And that is how we slowly accumulate more friends.



We had part-time work at MAHO-do the next day as well. While waiting for Hazuki-chan to arrive, I updated Majorika and Lala on yesterday's events.

The two had been worried about Hazuki-chan the whole time too, so my recount gave them some peace of mind and relief.

After hearing about the Ura Site incident from Tamaki Reika, Yada-kun went into a panic and rushed to look for Hazuki-chan.

As the online posts on the site had already disappeared, this caused some misunderstandings between the two. Hazuki-chan suggested that they stop seeing each other for a while, in case some schoolmates spotted them together and started more rumours.

His concern about Hazuki-chan might have been a little too excessive, but his appearance on the scene was really too late.

Hazuki-chan's explanation of the incident seemed to have eased his concern, but as her boyfriend, I wish he would at least have noticed that Hazuki-chan was not being her usual self.

And then, Yada-kun also told me how Tamaki had been concerned about Hazuki-chan as well.

It seems that Tamaki had gotten a boyfriend, and her selfish personality had undergone a change as a result.

Well, I'll write more about that later.

Although she still speaks to us in her usual tone, Tamaki has always been a beautiful girl, and if her personality takes a turn for the better, along with her reputation as a student of Karen Girls' Academy, won't she become super popular?

That somehow irritates me a little.

"Oh well, summer vacation is coming, so I'll be taking a gamble on meeting new people!" I told myself with determination.

"Shut up, Doremi. Get to work."

And I've pissed Majorika off again.



This happened days later, when the incident with Hazuki-chan had died down.

"Ehh—! Tamaki came to the store?"

"What's with your loud voice?" Majorika quipped.

As I had some stuff going on in school, I had arrived late to work.

Tamaki knew that we were doing part-time work here, but still,

"We didn't inform her of our work schedule. So, what did she want from us?"

"Well, that's where you're wrong," Majorika corrected me as she pointed to the corner where the mobile phone straps were displayed. "She came to purchase some straps."

"Ehhhh—"

As this was the MAHO-do, we did stock lots of charms and power stones amongst our goods.

All these goods were imported from the Witch world and catered to human customers, so they do possess some powers of their own.

Tamaki had bought a strap with an azure stone charm attached, known as lapis lazuli, for herself.

Our straps are cute, all with different stones and came in different designs.

Now that I'm looking at them, there does seem to be fewer straps on display. Could it be?

With my finger, I pointed to the left end of the shelf that held the straps, and moved it slowly over to the right end.

"Since we're talking about Tamaki, she must have bought everything in sight!" I concluded.

"She only bought two. It's just that without you girls here, there was no one to replenish the stock," Majorika cut me down readily.

To think that I had anticipated her to agree, I was a fool...

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"Sorry we're late"

It was evening, and Ai-chan, who was now sunburnt from all her activities, and Hazuki-chan, who had ended her violin session early, came in together.

Immediately, I updated them on Tamaki's visit.

"That's really quite a surprise..." Hazuki-chan said.

"What do you mean?"

Hazuki-chan, who had been kneading the magical clay with her fingers, stopped and pondered for a moment before speaking. "I had been so caught up with my own affairs, so I did not notice it then. But I've come to realize now that Tamaki-san does seem different... It's as if she has grown up."

Following Onpu-chan's advice, Hazuki-chan had quickly rallied for Tamaki to become her ally at Karen Girls' Academy, but Tamaki had taken no interest in the Ura Site. She had told Hazuki-chan not to bother herself with useless things like that.

At that time, I felt that Tamaki was a really cool girl.

"...That...must be it," Ai-chan slammed her fist on the worktable with a DON! and stood up.

"...It must be that!" DON! Hazuki-chan hit the worktable and stood up too.

Well, I couldn't lose out.

DON! I slammed my fist on the worktable and stood up... But what is it?

"It's love!" Majorika declared as she suddenly appeared.

"Ehhhhh—?"

I was the only one who was shocked.

"She stealthily came to buy straps, so it must have been embarrassing for her."

That might have been true.

"Our goods here are the real deal, and have gotten popular through word-of-mouth. Tamaki may have a problem that our goods can help with, so she could have come in all seriousness," Ai-chan said.

Shouldn't Tamaki be buying branded goods if she wanted to give someone a present?

Why did she choose to buy MAHO-do's straps?

By the way, I didn't know that Ai-chan was so interested in other's love affairs.

Ahh... She's been through it herself too.

"What's wrong, Doremi-chan? Why are you so motionless, like a Maui statue?" Ai-chan teased.

Oh, leave me alone.

At this moment, my life story unfolded within my mind like an album.

So much has happened in such a short time.

Fun things, tough times, even things which normal people don't get a chance to do; I've got to try it all.

Everyone's the same too... Ehh? My album doesn't have any pages on love... Am I so unattractive?

"Tamaki beat me to it —!" I shouted as I stood up.

Ai-chan and the others seemed to understand my heart's cries.

"It's alright, I don't have a boyfriend, too. I'm in the same boat as Doremi-chan all this while," Ai-chan comforted me.

"That's right. I think there are many people who like Doremi-chan," Hazuki-chan added.

What was that?!

Hazuki-chan, who has a boyfriend, and even Ai-chan too, they're all too calm.

They seemed so mature now, doing things that high school students do. Plus, they had also found things which they had a passion for.

"Fufuu, this is making me feel impatient~" I complained.

"Doremi-chan, you should seriously focus on MAHO-do," Ai-chan advised.

"That's right. You come up with all the designs, make cute cards... You've worked hard," Hazuki-chan added.

"Our sales have increased all due to the POPs made by Doremi-chan," Ai-chan continued.

However, I didn't feel comforted.

Oh, do you know about POPs? Those of you who had worked at supermarts or convenience stores should know about them.

Our job is not just about tagging the goods with price tags and arranging them. For example, the lapis lazuli picked out by Tamaki is known as a stone that brings luck and love. So, we also write descriptions of our goods on cards and stick them on. We call those POPs.

Customers who frequent MAHO-do read the POPs before making purchase decisions, or puzzle over what to buy. This makes their shopping experience joyful, and that makes me glad.

I've gone off-topic again. It seems that it's really true that Tamaki has a boyfriend now.

Speaking of which, when we met Tamaki while chasing after and losing Mukai-san, she was dressed in a weird way.

This is not the Tamaki we know.



A few days later, in the afternoon, Hazuki-chan reported for work full of energy. Upon seeing me, who was already here, she flipped open her notebook, just like a detective.

"Tamaki-san seems to have gotten a cat as a pet recently," she reported.

Next, Ai-chan opened the door and slapped me hard on the back, saying, "The name of Tamaki's boyfriend is really funny. He's called Masamune."

"Ouch... That's quite a traditional name," I replied.

"He's the one-eyed dragon, just like that Date Masamune, the military commander from the Warring States," Ai-chan added.

"Eh, do you think his parents are history maniacs?" I wondered.

"That's not true. Masamune is the name of the cat. Her boyfriend is a senior from Doremi-chan's school," Hazuki-chan corrected us.

"Really? I heard that he had a really beautiful OL girlfriend, and though he rejected Tamaki because of that, she's still persistently making her move on him," Ai-chan said.

"Isn't it true that he works at a host club, and so goes home with his customers?" Hazuki-chan asked.

"Host club? Just how old is this guy?" Ai-chan countered.

"Alright, where did you two get all these information?" I asked as I came between my two excited friends. This could go on forever.

"Erm, Tamaki-san has been leaving school early these days... So I heard about all these from her good friend Shimakura Kaori-chan," Hazuki-chan replied.

"What? Kaori-chan? Then half of that would have been exaggerated. How about you, Ai-chan?"

"The senior of my track club's senior's friend works as Tamaki's home tutor..."

"Your senior's senior's friend?... Isn't that too far a connection? Alright, I'm dismissing what you two have said," I concluded.

I mean, Tamaki isn't one who can keep secrets.

If she really has a boyfriend, I'm sure she would boast about it. She must have been attracted to his looks. Tamaki is a cute girl herself, and confident too, so I think she will make a move on a guy if she likes him.

"Guess we still don't know the truth," I said.

"Since Tamaki-san hasn't told us about it, maybe it's because it isn't a serious relationship. It seems to me like she's troubled by the issue," Hazuki-chan said.

"If she bought our strap, it means that she hasn't confessed to him yet, right?" Ai-chan stated.

We looked at each other.

If she were really in trouble, I would definitely wish to help her out somehow. Yes, I felt regret at being surpassed by her, but I was still curious. This could even become like a study of love for my own reference.

"Alright. Chatting here won't get anything done. Hazuki-chan, go ask Tamaki herself. If her boyfriend is really a senior at our school, I'm sure someone would know about it," Ai-chan said.

Tamaki had been really cool about Hazuki-chan's incident with the Ura Site, saying that she had no time to gossip... Now that I thought about it, maybe it was because the same thing was happening to her.

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When Hazuki-chan asked her about it, Tamaki readily shared her story.

It happened when Hazuki-chan was thanking Tamaki for her support with the Ura Site incident. Maybe Tamaki wished for someone to know about her troubles too.

"Well... It's true that she likes a Grade 9 senior from Doremi-chan's school. He's quite a suave guy, a little of a bad boy, quite tall..."

"H-Hazuki-chan, but what is his name?" Ai-chan pressed.

We were gathered in the MAHO-do again.

We had closed up shop, and after cleaning up, we had gathered at the table as usual.

We normally spent the time sticking price tags and bar codes onto items, or thinking of cute POP designs, and we usually enjoyed ourselves.

But once Hazuki-chan started talking, her hands stopped working.

"Yes, his name is Tachibana Kyouhei. Do you know him?" Hazuki-chan asked.

Upon hearing the name, our expressions changed, and Hazuki-chan, noticing it, frowned as well.

"We know him by name and face. I don't really know him personally, but he gives me the creeps," Ai-chan said.

"Yep, me too," I agreed.

I have seen him around school.

Though I would not call him suave, his eyes are frightening. Plus, he is unapproachable. And because he is tall, there seems to be too much of him. However, I could not think of any rumours about him yet. I mean, he is from a different year, and since we had just started high school, we had not had any contact.

Hazuki-chan took out her notebook and assumed the air of a detective again.

"Firstly, his name is definitely Tachibana Kyouhei-san."



"So he's not Masamune afterall?" Ai-chan asked.

"Masamune is the name of the cat that she received from him. That cat is injured, so until it heals, Tamaki-san has been leaving for home right after school to look after it," Hazuki-chan explained.

The cat is a Russian Blue owned by one of Tachibana-senpai's friends. It had been born with sight in only one eye, so that was where the name Masamune came from. Because of this weakness, it often lost out on its mother's milk to its siblings. Therefore, it grew up to be a small cat, and would have died if it had been cast out into the wild.

Tachibana-senpai had taken the cat in to look after it himself, but the apartment he lives in does not allow pets, and after he was discovered, he had been keeping it in the nearby park and feeding it regularly.

One evening, Tamaki had witnessed the cat being bullied by children while on her way home, and had saved it and brought it to a nearby animal hospital for treatment.

"It so happened that the hospital is owned by the cat's original owner. When Tachibana-san heard that the cat was injured, he rushed over, and that was when he and Tamaki-san met," Hazuki-chan finished.

"Yes, that is such a cliched meeting~," I commented.

Really, it is just like the story of some old-school shoujo manga.

"The bad boy and the rich girl? What a great pairing!" Ai-chan seemed to be thinking the same thing too.

It was probably chance that Tamaki saved the cat, but I was amazed that Tachibana-senpai happened to be at the hospital at the same time.

"Truly, the students who attend Karen Girls' Academy are mostly rich young ladies, so he probably won't have gotten to know her otherwise," Hazuki-chan said.

With those frightening eyes of his, I would have been scared had he looked at me, even if I did not know that he is a senior. I might even have dashed away.

"That's our Tamaki. She's never been afraid of anything," Ai-chan said.

If Tamaki was here, she would definitely have gotten mad and replied "That's rude!" to Ai-chan's comment.

According to what Hazuki-chan heard, Tachibana-senpai had spoken to the doctor at the hospital while Masamune was being treated, about how he had often brought it, which was often ill, in for treatment. He also told the doctor about its partial blindness, and how it would be dangerous to keep him out in the wild, and how he had been searching for an apartment that allowed him to keep pets, and was planning to move.

Knowing only his face and name, we thought of Tachibana-senpai as a "scary guy", but to Tamaki, he would have seemed like the best "gentleman", and that must have been when it started.

We had gossiped and judged him based on our first impressions, and that isn't a good thing.

I realized that, apart from the fact that we had not posted our thoughts online, we were no different from those posters on the Ura Site.

Hazuki-chan's incident had not taught us anything.

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Still, I felt that Tachibana-senpai must have some peculiarities.

Following Tamaki's wishes, we began to find out more about him.

It was partly because we were curious, but also because Tamaki was worried.

He had seemed more rough than usual lately, and appeared to show no interest in girls.

Although he met up occasionally with Tamaki, it was mostly about the cat.

During the weekends, she had spotted him exiting a building near the train station in the evenings. Was that his workplace?

We found out that the place was a bar operated by a tenant, so it was hard for us young girls to drop by for a visit, but it seemed like it wasn't a host club after all.

Also, Yada-kun's workplace was nearby too, so we managed to get some information from him.

As a senior in school, he had been attending all his lessons regularly and seriously.

And rather than being mixed up with delinquents, he was a lone wolf, often appearing hostile.

"He looks at people in a frightening way, and he is quite a big guy too. So he must seem like he's looking for a fight, even when he really isn't"

"No, no, he isn't." With that, Ai-chan resolutely cut down all of Tamaki's concerns.

Because if he really got into fights, people wouldn't have dared to start all those rumours about him in the first place.

And so, young lady, you don't have to worry...



It was the day when the announcement for the rainy season was made.

"Tachibana-san lives together with his mother. He feels that Masamune is really like him, so he thinks it's cute. How should I say this? It's nice that his personality does not fit his looks. It appeals to my maternal instinct!... So she says," Hazuki-chan said, imitating Tamaki's voice.

"What? That girlish side isn't like Tamaki at all. It's like she's someone else," Ai-chan said as she scratched her head.

I was relayed all these latest news through mail and phone calls. "Well, that's because she's in love... Even so, it makes me feels weird inside."

"I know, I know," Ai-chan agreed.

It seemed as if Tamaki wished to have a date with him without the cat as an excuse. However,

"She says that even when they meet up about the cat, it's only for a short while before he goes off to his part-time job. And though he replies to her messages, he changes the topic whenever she brings up the idea of them going on a date together during their free time," Hazuki-chan said.

"Tamaki's being really aggressive here," Ai-chan said. After some thought, she added, "Actually, this might work out."

Ai-chan was referring to the fact that there weren't any girls around Tachibana-senpai who were like Tamaki, trying to connect with him without any bashfulness.

That's true. Tamaki was mature and not like a high school student at all, plus she gives off a reckless vibe, too.

"That's why. Isn't she afraid that he'd back off, worried that she'll get too involved with him?" Ai-chan asked.

"Tamaki-san did mention that he's been avoiding her lately. She's worried that she's become a bother to him," Hazuki-chan replied.

"Is it because she's been stalking him, dressed in a very un-Tamaki-like style?" I asked.

"Hmm, that's partially it, but she did so because she heard some rumours that he has a beautiful OL girlfriend," Hazuki-chan said, tilting her head to the side.

"He probably treats Tamaki like a little sister, after all. That OL beauty must be the real deal," I concluded.

"Huh, that rumoured OL beauty? That's probably fake information passed around by those in his workplace. More importantly, has there been any more news?" Ai-chan asked.

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The next day after school, Ai-chan and I were heading to the MAHO-do.

The instincts of a girl in love could be really sharp sometimes.

Ai-chan and my phone started ringing at the same time.

"...! It's from Tamaki. What? Meet you now at the school gates? At Misora High School, not Karen Girls' Academy?" I spoke into the phone.

"...! What's wrong, Hazuki-chan?! What, meet you outside school?" Ai-chan was talking on her phone too.

Though we were just outside the MAHO-do then, we turned around and headed back to school.

"Took you long enough!" We had run all the way back, and this was all Tamaki had to say.

"What's wrong, you two?" Ai-chan asked.

"I don't know. It seems like Tamaki-san needs to see Yamaki-sensei here..." Hazuki-chan replied.

"Please get Yamaki-sensei out here. Hurry!" Tamaki urged.

W-w-wait a minute.

Why Leon?

"A-N-Y-W-A-Y, I'll explain when you get Yamaki-sensei out here! He'll definitely come if you tell him that it's about Tachibana-san," Tamaki shouted in frustration.

Tamaki could be really frightening when she's agitated, and we felt slightly cornered, so we dashed to the staffroom and managed to get Yamaki-sensei outside.

"What's with you girls?" Leon asked as he was pulled along by the arms by Ai-chan and me.

"We don't know ourselves..." Ai-chan replied.

"Our friend told us that you'd understand if we told you that it's about Tachibana-senpai... They're at the school gates," I added.

Hearing that, Leon stopped in his tracks. "What, Tachibana?! What's wrong with Tachibana?" So saying, Leon's expression immediately turned grim.

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When we brought Leon out, Tamaki wasted no time with a greeting, and immediately started talking about Tachibana-senpai's current situation.

"Tachibana-san has been keeping his promise to Yamaki-sensei, and hasn't been talking to his old gang anymore. However, he just told me that there's one final thing he has to settle with them..."

It seemed that Tachibana-senpai's old gang had found out about his close relationship with Tamaki.

And then, because of the cat, Tamaki's parents also got suspicious, and they found out about Tachibana-senpai as well.

"I've tried explaining to Papa and Mama, but they don't understand. Recently, they've been sending me to and from school, and I'm not allowed to go out alone. And Tachibana's messages have turned curt lately, and he doesn't answer my calls..."

To come here today, she had to lie to her parents that she was going to the MAHO-do to visit Hazuki-chan.

She had wanted to locate his address and know more about what was going on.

Yamaki-sensei, who had been Tachibana-senpai's homeroom teacher in his freshman year, seemed to have spoken to him lots of times.

Recently, Tachibana-senpai had found something he wanted to do, so he had decided to break away from his old gang, and came to discuss the issue with Leon. Leon had listened with concern, and had promised to become Tachibana-senpai's ally, and had given him advice on how to break away from the gang completely.

I realized that Leon was really a great teacher, and I had passed my judgement solely based on looks again.

Knowing only bits and pieces of the story, we still managed to piece it all together. So, we followed Leon and Tamaki to Tachibana-senpai's apartment.

"It's dangerous for you girls, so please go home," Leon advised.

"No! I'm involved in this, too," Tamaki refused to let go.

"We're Tamaki's friends. If anything happens, we'll all run like crazy, so let us come along too!" I added. We couldn't leave Tamaki alone. Between us 4, we'd surely come up with something. Either way, Tamaki was set on going, and should the time come, we still had our magic to save her and ourselves.

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There was a really beautiful lady standing on the road outside Tachibana-senpai's apartment.

"Ah, Tachibana-san! Where's Kyouhei?"

Ehhhh—! Leon had called her Tachibana-san.

Since Tachibana-senpai stayed with his mother, that means... Tamaki turned slightly and whispered, "That's Tachibana-san's mother. I only found out recently too."

"Mother?... She's so young and beautiful. She could be mistaken for an OL beauty," Ai-chan said in a daze. Tachibana-senpai's mother was a real head-turner, just like a model, a beauty.

She's really so different from my mum. If I looked closely, I could guess that she was about 40 years-old, but I would never think that she had any children of high school age.

No wonder Tamaki used to feel that she was "beaten".

Tamaki moved toward Tachibana-senpai's mother and introduced herself. "I'm Tamaki Reika. Tachibana-san has been acting strange recently, so I got worried and called Yamaki-sensei out here."

Tachibana-senpai's mother seemed shocked at Tamaki's explanation. "So you're Tamaki-san? I got a call from Kyouhei just now, saying that his old gang had kidnapped someone called Tamaki. I was just going to look for him!"

"But where is he?! I'll go, too. It'll be alright once he knows that I'm fine, right?" Tamaki insisted.

Just then, a large motorcycle approached us. Stopping right before us, a woman clad in rider's gear got down and demanded, "Let's go, Shouko."

She took off her helmet, and we were faced with another model-like beauty.

Wait, she's not a model. Isn't she Yamaki Minako, that charisma model who had been adorning the front covers of all those housewife magazines these days?!

"What? Is this some battleground for beauties?" Ai-chan asked, but Leon had stepped forward.

"Minako, why are you here?"

"Oh, my dear, were you worried about me?"

Minako? My dear? We leaned out from behind Leon and stared at the charisma model.

"Ehhhhh—?! You're sensei's wife—?!"

Leon turned around at our rude statement, trying to hide his embarrassment.

It was truly beauty and the beast... Or rather, beauty and the reptile.

"Well, if we go together, I think we'll clear things up faster than if Shouko goes alone," Yamaki-sensei's wife declared as she walked over to Tachibana-senpai's mother. The two beauties conferred for a second, and then smiled at each other.

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Putting on a helmet, Leon got onto the bike behind his wife, and the two left.

Left behind with Tachibana-senpai's mother, Tamaki was of course the one who felt left out... "Hey, why did they leave me behind?!"

Then, looking at us, who were staring dazedly after the bike, she continued, "What are you all staring at! Let's give chase!"

With that, she turned and walked towards Tachibana-senpai's mother, probably to ask her for the location.

Watching Tamaki, Tachibana-senpai's mother giggled.

"Mrs. Tachibana, please be serious"

"I'm sorry. I'm sure the issue will be resolved soon, but let's go," she said as she hustled us into her car.

Gripping the steering wheel, she suddenly said, "I'm sorry for laughing just now."

With that, she told us that she got to know about Yamaki-sensei and Tachibana-senpai's promise because she and Yamaki-sensei's wife were cousins.

In the past, Yamaki-sensei's wife worked as a charisma model while she was a student at Karen Girls' Academy. Tachibana-senpai's mother was also a model then, but the two were now skilled beauticians.

They often fetched Tachibana-senpai to and from school, so the rumours about him probably started because they were such beauties.

And while I wished for Tachibana-senpai to be safe, I braced myself to be prepared to use magic just in case, as I gripped my apprentice tap tightly in my pocket.



When our car pulled into the parking lot, we saw Tachibana-senpai and Mr and Mrs Leon facing off against a group of scary-looking boys.

The tension of this charged situation was really strong.

There was nothing we could do but hold our breaths and stay in the car. Only Tamaki pulled open the car door and stepped out, "Tachibana-san, I'm alright."

With that, she dashed out and put herself out in the middle between the two groups. She was a reckless person, but this was too extreme.

And that was not all...

"You people are too extreme, using me to lure Tachibana-san out like this. If anything had really happened to me, the Tamaki group will not keep quiet!"

Her voice did tremble a little, but she had said it.

What's with this confidence? That's definitely our Tamaki.

She had spoken well against these scary-looking boys, her words hitting them like bullets.

But that's not the time to be saying that!

We flew out of the car as well, and stood in front of Tamaki, as if protecting her.

Just then, Tachibana-senpai's mother spoke up belatedly from behind us. "True friends will become your power in tough times. It's great that Tamaki-san has three such friends."

We turned around to see her smiling.

Good for you, Tamaki. His mother had become your ally in such a short time.

Tachibana-senpai should calm down now at the sight of Tamaki. It was a good idea for her to come along, after all.

The only reason he came to confront these people was to save Tamaki. However, he still seemed to want to get even with the gang.

His old gang slowly advanced upon us, chewing gum in their mouths and smirking.

Immediately, Tachibana-senpai swept us behind him, and stood between the gang and us, together with Leon and his wife.

"Tachibana, this is all your past coming back at you. You do understand that, right?" Leon spoke quietly but firmly, and Tachibana-senpai nodded.

"Shut up, old man.", "Tachibana, you're hanging out with your parents and girls now? That's so uncool."

Wow, they're so scary.

You guys were the ones who lured a single guy out using a high school girl, and then gathered here in a group waiting to confront him. So who are the real cowards?

"I don't want such a huge and frightening-looking son!" Leon shouted in a booming voice, totally different from his quiet tone just now.

"W-wait, Yamaki-sensei, what are you saying! Now's not the time to come up with smart retorts," Ai-chan cried.

Hearing Ai-chan, the gang started sniggering amongst themselves.

"Oh, now you're being laughed at by high school kids." So saying, Leon's wife unfolded a coat that was in her hands, and placed it upon Leon's shoulders over his white shirt. Isn't that the coat worn by delinquent biker gangs in the past?

"Y-Yamaki...?" The gang members looked at each other and started to whisper amongst themselves.

"What is happening?"

"That's an old biker gang coat. Look, there's lots of words embroidered on it," Ai-chan pointed out.

Wearing his biker gang coat, Leon advanced upon the gang.

For some reason, the gang started to back away.

"This biker gang coat is not just for show," Leon shouted as he turned on his heel and showed the back of the coat to the gang.

—"Disregarding opinions, Misora Bakuretsu (4) Gang, Third Generation Leader, Yamaki Rokurou" was embroidered at the back.

Things had gotten crazier all of a sudden.

"Can it be? That legendary..."

The gang was whispering again. What were they saying?

I heard them say the word "legendary".

"We're sorry!" With that, the one who looked like the leader of the gang suddenly prostrated himself on the ground.

This was my first time seeing someone prostrate himself in real life. Then, like an avalanche, all the other members bowed down too. All of them were trembling.

Leon grabbed the arm of the leader, pulled him up, and appeared to whisper something to him. The leader then gathered all the gang members, and the group disappeared from the parking lot in a second.

I think the expressions of our faces then were all variations of shock.

Maybe you could understand the mood better if I described that it felt as if Mito Komon (5) had just brought out his seal case.

It was a long time later when we heard from Leon about this world that we did not know of, where that coat was a symbol of each generation's biker gang leader.

4. Bakuretsu – Explosive

5. Mito Komon was the alternate identity of powerful Edo period daimyo Tokugawa Mitsukuni, who roamed the countryside disguised as a commoner to catch and punish corrupt officials. His seal case was the proof of his real identity.



Either way, it was definitely a mistake to judge anyone by their appearance or what rumours say about them.

For example, we no longer thought that Tachibana-senpai was nothing but a scary-looking senior.

Plus, Leon and his wife were so cool too.

"So, what now?"

It was several days after the incident when the three of us had the chance to gather together in the MAHO-do.

After the usual chores of closing up shop, cleaning up and sticking on price tags, I asked, "So are the two of them getting along well?"

I really wanted to know.

"Well, they're taking it slowly for now. Tachibana-senpai is studying really hard to become a vet, and he's busy with the part-time job too, so they don't really get to meet up often," Hazuki-chan explained.

Well, that was unexpected, I guess.

And it seems like Tamaki often tells Hazuki-chan about lots of things now.

"A vet? There's really so many unexpected twists in this story," Ai-chan commented.

"Tamaki-san has been wondering if she should apply to the same university as him, so she is really studying hard these days," Hazuki-chan added.

Ahh, I'm so envious.

Will it be my turn to star in a love story soon?

Maybe I'll bump into some hunky high school boy round the corner one day on my way to school.

"Doremi-chan, just keep on thinking about that, and you'll get your own boyfriend soon, too," Hazuki-chan said.

"That's right. Maybe he's been beside you all along," Ai-chan teased.

These two can really read my mind sometimes!

Hehehe, I hope I can really come out on top someday...

Chapter 4 “Summer☆Twinkle”

The hydrangeas that had bloomed in MAHO-do's yard had now wilted together with the end of the rainy season.

And in the coming summer, as the sunflowers grow tall and bloom, I will definitely find my boyfriend.

END OF CHAPTER 4

Chapter 5 “Believe in your dreams”

The breeze blew through the gaps between the beech trees as we made our way towards the source of the Fukiyama River.

My dad was in the lead, followed by Onpu-chan, with me bringing up the rear.

The three of us were clad in those waist-high waders for creek fishers, and we were all sweating buckets.

I was wearing Dad's old waders, while Onpu-chan was clad in Grandpa's waders. Both were slightly too large for us, which made walking difficult.



"Dad, are we there yet?"

"Just a little more, hang on."

Dad, who was holding all our fishing rods, was clad in an additional fly fishing vest, so he was probably sweating much more than us.

"Onpu-chan's here with us too, so let's just take a rest," I suggested, exhausted. We had already been walking for close to 30 minutes.

"I'm alright. Anyway..." Onpu-chan replied, looking totally unruffled. Then, she appeared to hear something. "Hmm...?"

I listened hard, too, and dimly heard the murmuring of a stream.

"You hear that?"

"Yep!"

Once we exit this forest and find that stream, we would be able to freshen up in the clear and cool water.

I suddenly felt full of energy again and continued to walk on, humming to myself.

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So how did the three of us end up creek fishing? It happened last night, as we were gathered around the sunken fireplace at Grandpa's place, eating dinner.

"This fish is delicious!" Onpu-chan declared.

Since coming to Hida, Onpu-chan had remained mostly quiet, so it all started with this sentence from her.

Onpu-chan had been doing a lot of serious thinking with regards to her future. She had hoped to reach a decision of whether to continue being an actress or not over this vacation trip.

Knowing Onpu-chan's dilemma, we found it hard to relax thus far.

We were all frustrated that we could do nothing but stay by her side and watch over her. However, with this exclamation from her, the atmosphere immediately lightened up.

Grandpa had been grilling trout over the sunken fireplace for us.

That day, Dad and Grandpa had gone fishing at the Fukiyama River near our house. They had caught these beautiful trout, which resembled the well-known salmon.

"This trout is different from salmon because it has these red spots. With the Sakawa River in Kanagawa Prefecture acting as a border, the East side is where all the salmon are, while the trout are on the West side," Dad explained, using his vast knowledge of fishing. After that, he asked, "So? Would you girls like to go catch some trout tomorrow?"

"..."

Onpu-chan did not seem very enthusiastic.

"There's something I'd like to show Onpu-chan there," Dad added.

"Something to show me?"

Without answering her, Dad turned to Grandpa and asked, "Old man, those nymphs come out around Bon Festival, right?"

Grandpa nodded wordlessly.

"What are these nymph things?" I asked.

"Nymphs are the young of aquatic insects such as mayflies. There's a stagnant pool near the source of the Fukiyama River where the water doesn't flow much, and that's where the nymphs emerge as flying adults all at once. It's a magical place where all the trout and char gather to catch their prey, unmindful of any fishermen. That's why we don't even need live bait to catch those fish."

"Does that mean that even I can catch some fish on my own?" I asked.

"Of course," Dad answered.

"That sounds interesting! Onpu-chan, shall we go?" I urged.

"Alright!"



"Yosh, it's decided then! Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan, how about you?" Dad asked.

"Hazuki-chan said that she'll help me with homework! So she's out!" Pop declared.

"Mayflies sound like large mosquitoes to me. Sorry. I'm really bad with insects," Hazuki-chan added.

"I'll pass, too. The competition is nearing, so I'd like to go practice in the grounds of that elementary school behind the house," Ai-chan said.

In the end, the three of us were the ones who made our way up to the pool beside the creek.



As the sun slanted towards the west, the water surface reflected its rays and shone golden.

Leaning over the water's edge, we washed our faces and dried them off with towels, then wiped the sweat off from our bodies.

As Onpu-chan and I quenched our thirst with beverages that we had brought along, Dad fixed the reel and line onto one of the fishing rods and started fly fishing.

Immediately after he cast the line, a trout about 20cm long flew out of the water and ate up the baited hook.

Dad quickly planted the fishing rod into the ground, and, without reeling it in, he grabbed the line and expertly pulled it in. Then, using the net that had been tied to his back, he caught the trout.

"Wow, that was awesome!"

Onpu-chan and I were both amazed by this turn of events, and rushed over to look at the trout in the net.

With blue barcode-like stripes and red spots, it was a truly beautiful trout.

"The fins are fully developed too, see? The trout in this region are all wild, not cultured by man," Dad said happily as he unhooked the trout and pulled out a dropper from his vest pocket.

He filled up the dropper with water from the stream, stuck the dropper into the trout's mouth, and injected the water into the fish.

Loosening the dropper, he then sucked out some water from the trout's mouth, and then squeezed out that water onto a small white dish he had prepared.

With that, the prey which the trout had ingested before it was caught flowed out onto the dish together with the water. There were black insects that resembled caterpillars, as well as cream-coloured ones that looked like mosquito larvae.

"Fufu, I was right. The black ones are mayfly nymphs, and these cream ones are adult moults," Dad said as he released the trout and washed away the insects' remains from the dish in the stream. Then, he put it back into his vest, together with the dropper.

Turning the reel, he reeled the fishing line back and unhooked the artificial bait from the fishing rod.

"Dad, aren't we fishing anymore?" I asked.

"We just need to travel a little more, and we'll catch all the fish we want, so it's okay."

So saying, he attached the reels onto all our fishing rods and helped us thread the fishing line through the rod.

Next, he attached some artificial bait that resembled the adult mayflies onto our hooks and passed the rods to us. Then, we all started to walk towards the pool upstream.

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The pool was a silent place, as if time had stopped still at that spot.

The water still flowed, but so gently that you couldn't hear it. The water surface was like a mirror, reflecting the sky as it changed from a golden to red colour.

We sat down on some rocks along the gentle inner curve on the right side of the stream and waited for the mayfly nymphs to moult.

Watching the sun setting towards the west, Dad said, "It'll begin soon, the festival."

As if waiting for those words, tiny rings started to ripple across the surface of the pool.

Inside those ripples, we saw cream-coloured nymphs emerge and fly out of the water, their tails swinging.

With that, more ripples started to form, and the nymphs all started to fly up out of the water.

In the next instant, trout and char started to jump out of the water, cutting through all those tiny ripples.

Splash... Splash... Splash splash splash splash!

A whole haze of nymphs was dancing wildly before our eyes.

There were so many of them that the surroundings were blurred out by their numbers.

And on the water's surface, a countless number of fish continued to dance as they caught their prey.

Onpu-chan and I were struck speechless and sat rooted to the spot.

"What is this...!" Onpu-chan asked. I turned to look enquiringly at Dad.

Dad was busy pressing on his camera's shutter as he took photos of the scene, "We call the process of aquatic insects moulting as hatching, but when all the larvae hatch together at once like this, we call it a super hatch."

"But there's so many of them..."

Some nymphs had fallen onto us and were wriggling about, but we paid them no heed as we stared dazedly at the natural phenomenon occurring before our eyes.

Having taken enough pictures, Dad's face grew serious as he spoke to Onpu-chan. "I wanted to show this to Onpu-chan. All aquatic insects, not just these nymphs, live within water for a year, and when the time comes, they moult altogether at once. Among them, there are some who fail, and some who get eaten by the trout, but all of them still struggle and put all their effort into moulting."

Onpu-chan continued to stare at the super hatch and the feeding fish joyfully jumping out of the water, unblinking.

"Onpu-chan right now is just like one of those nymphs, growing up from a child into an adult. Continuing to struggle, and finally emerging, I think that's the best decision after all."

"...Thank you. You have shown me something really wonderful."

"Even Dad can say good things if he wants to," I said.

"What's with that 'even'?!“ Dad retorted.

Onpu-chan giggled.

"Alright, let's catch some dinner!"

We all cast out our lines together.

The trout and char were caught on our hooks one after another.

We released all fish measuring below 20cm, and kept nine which were about 25cm long.

As we kept our equipment, the super hatch came to an end, and Fukiyama River's pool sank back into silence as if nothing had happened.

Nature is really magical and amazing.



From the next day on, Onpu-chan got really active and began to chat happily with everyone, as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

Early in the morning, she invited a sleepy Pop to join her for a morning workout at the nearby elementary school. Then, she went with Grandma and Mum into the fields to harvest the dewy vegetables. She then accompanied Ai-chan to her track training, the two of them working up some good sweat.

I heard all of this from Hazuki-chan.

Yes, I slept in all the way till noon.

That was because we all got so excited during last night's pajama talk that I couldn't get to sleep. Ahahaha.

With that, I went to wash up with water drawn up from the well in the yard. I spotted Onpu-chan heading towards Grandpa's workroom, which was situated a distance away.

"Good morning, Onpu-chan."

"We're way past the time for morning greetings. You're really a sleepyhead"

"Oops. Anyway, what's up?"

"I was thinking of asking Grandpa to let me watch him work," Onpu-chan explained.

"Ooh, I'll come along, too."

Chapter 5 “Believe in your dreams”

Wiping my face with a towel, I followed Onpu-chan into Grandpa's workroom.

The smell of varnish hit us as we entered the room.

Besides farming, Grandpa is also a famous Shunkei lacquerware maker over in this region.

The Shunkei style differs from the usual lacquerware in that it brings out the beauty of the original wood material, and so it utilizes yellow and red tones more. It can be done on trays, bento boxes and teacup saucers.

"Is it alright if we watch you at work?" Onpu-chan asked. Grandpa, who was applying the finishing varnish onto a Noh mask used in shrine ceremonies, stopped and nodded wordlessly.

Onpu-chan's eyes sparkled as she intently watched Grandpa's careful work, but I soon got bored and let out a big yawn.

"Doremi, I'm thirsty. Could you get me some tea?" Grandpa asked as he passed me an empty teapot.

"OK!"

As I was about to take the teapot, Onpu-chan said, "I'll go instead," and reached out for the teapot.

"It's okay. Onpu-chan, you want to speak with Grandpa, right? See you"

After I left, Onpu-chan got up and went to sit behind Grandpa.

"Shall I massage your shoulders?"

"Sorry for the trouble, but thank you."

As Onpu-chan's hands worked on the massage, she asked, "Grandpa, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"How long have you been a Shunkei lacquerware worker?"

"Hmm... I've been at it even before I met Grandma, so that'll be about 60 years."

"Wow! That's amazing."

"It really isn't"

"But you still continue to create such wonderful works. I really respect that. You must be talented at it," Onpu-chan said as she glanced at the trays and bento boxes which Grandpa had displayed on a shelf.

"Talent? That's not true. I just watched and replicated what my own Dad used to do."

"But that alone won't help you to create such beautiful works. It's just like fine arts."

"Hoh hoh ho, you can praise me, but I can't reward you with anything other than tea."

Onpu-chan giggled, and that was when I returned.

Pouring out tea for the three of us, we all drank it together.

"If there's really something I'm talented at, it's the strength to continue doing what I like," Grandpa said with half-lidded eyes.

"Continuing... to do what I like?"

Onpu-chan's expression brightened in an instant, and I could guess why.



"I'll continue being an actress for my own sake."

Onpu-chan announced this decision one night as we were playing with sparklers in the yard.

The sudden declaration garnered shocked looks from both Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan at first.

Since I had already suspected that, I just smiled and replied, "Oh! I'm glad that your worries are over."

"Thank you."

"I knew it. Onpu-chan can't just be a normal girl. Being an actress really fits you more," Hazuki-chan said as she walked over and passed a new sparkler to Onpu-chan.

"Really?"

"Onpu-chan looks really pretty tonight. It's as if your superstar aura is shining through," Ai-chan added as she lit her own sparkler from Onpu-chan's.

"Thank you," Onpu-chan replied, smiling as she twirled her sparkler in circles.

Not losing out, I twirled my own sparkler and asked, "Hey, Onpu-chan, you said that you'll continue being an actress for your own sake. What do you mean?"

"Ever since I entered the entertainment industry and worked hard at being a child idol, I did it all for the sake of fulfilling Mama's dream. In exchange, Mama helped me to handle everything outside of work"

"But you were a child then; that was her responsibility."

"I was really spoilt then. But from now on, I'll stand on my own two feet, and, no matter how slow my progress, I'll continue walking the path of an actress with enjoyment."

So saying, she turned towards Grandpa and Dad, who were drinking beer on the veranda, and gave them a slight nod.

Grandpa and Dad smiled and raised their beer glasses.

Just then, Mum brought out some barley tea. We all grabbed a cup and lifted them into the air.

"Let's toast to Onpu-chan's future!"

"Cheers!"

We all drained our glasses in one gulp.



Onpu-chan, being Onpu-chan, got things moving really quickly.

After returning from Hida, where we spent the O-Bon vacation, Onpu-chan appeared before us shortly after we resumed our work at the MAHO-do.

"Hi!" She waved her right hand lightly as she jauntily entered the store.

"O-Onpu-chan?!"

"W-why are you here?!"

Hazuki-chan and I stared open-mouthed in shock, as if we had seen a ghost.

Ai-chan was on a break today, as she had to compete in the Inter-High competition.

"What? I'm not a ghost. Look, I have legs"

Without thinking, Hazuki-chan and I glanced down at Onpu-chan's legs.

"Fufufu, so you're the real Onpu-chan," Hazuki-chan said with a wry laugh.

"But why? You didn't say anything about coming here when we were at Hida"

"Fufu. Actually, I've just been signed on to a new artiste production company, so I came to let everyone know."

"Ehhh—!"

I fell off my chair in shock, and Hazuki-chan's glasses slipped down her nose.

As if satisfied with our reactions, Onpu-chan laughed as she clutched her tummy.

"Onpu-chan, that was mean..."

"Sorry. That was a better reaction than I had expected."

Onpu-chan helped me up, then sat down at the table and started to talk about how she signed on to the new artiste production company.

The following day after deciding that she would pursue the life of an actress, Onpu-chan returned to Hokkaido and announced her decision, as well as her wish to debut once again in Tokyo, to her parents.

Onpu-chan's parents, sensing that her decision was final, assented to her request.

Then, she systematically contacted every single artiste production company introduced by her celebrity acquaintances. However, as she had been labelled as a child idol capable of playing only children's roles, and with her popularity in a slump, there was no company who wanted her.

However, Onpu-chan did not give up.

In the past, Onpu-chan had met with an actress of the same age, Kirino Karen-chan, at an audition, and they were still keeping in contact. After consulting together, Karen-chan introduced Onpu-chan to the company that she was signed on with.

Onpu-chan immediately wrote a letter to the company, introducing herself and expressing her wish to debut again as an actress, and a reply letter asking for a face-to-face interview came soon after.

And today, she had travelled to Tokyo for the interview at the company office.

This ability to take action is Onpu-chan's true strength.

"Their office was really quite small, but they focus more on developing their celebrities and talents rather than just earning profit, so I've decided to sign up with them."

"That's great."

"Congrats, Onpu-chan."

"Thank you."

Just then, Majorika and Lala came in and joined us.

"Oh, is that Onpu-chan!" Majorika exclaimed.

"Majorika, Lala, it's been so long!"

The three embraced, rejoicing at the reunion.

"Majorika, Onpu-chan has just decided to sign on with a new company."

"Oh, is that true? So are you here to stay?"

"Nope. I plan to stay at the office dorms."

"Oh, speaking of that, there were some rumours about you going to sell the family home?..."

"Those were all fabricated by the media. Once Mama has recovered, the whole family will be coming back to stay there."

"I knew it"

"Won't all this moving around be tough on Onpu?"

"That's true. How about becoming a witch apprentice too, Onpu-chan?" Lala lightly suggested.

We had also advised her to do so, but Onpu-chan still refused resolutely. "I'm fine like this."

"But..."

"If I could use magic, I'll definitely use it for my own gains like I did in the past. Also, I'll try to heal Mama's illness," Onpu-chan replied with a smile as she stuck her tongue out at us mischievously, though her eyes were serious.

It was a silent signal to drop the topic.

Sensing that, Hazuki-chan changed the topic, "How about school?"

"That's alright. I've already transferred to a high school that offers courses for celebrities."

"That's our Onpu-chan! You really think of everything."

"Dance and vocal training lessons will begin tomorrow, so it's best to clear away all these irrelevant issues first."

"Segawa Onpu is finally starting out on the path to becoming a true actress. We'll definitely support you!"

"Good luck!"

"Thank you. Enough about me. Doremi-chan, I met Kotake-kun just now while on my way here," Onpu-chan said.

"! R-Really..."

"Kotake-kun has become really cool! I now understand why Doremi-chan wrote him a love letter."

During our vacation in Hida, I had told Onpu-chan everything about my interactions with Kotake.

"We didn't talk much, and when I started to talk about Doremi-chan, Kotake-kun dashed off as if escaping from something."

"Onpu-chan, let's not talk about this anymore!" I cried, trying to change the topic.

"Judging from how he looked, I think he's still worrying over the fact that he didn't write you a reply."

"So Onpu-chan thinks so too. I really believe that myself," Hazuki-chan joined in the discussion whole-heartedly. "A written confession really means business, so he's probably really thinking things through."

"I understand. I felt this way too when I went off to Hokkaido. I knew that everyone would definitely be worried about me, but it would be really troublesome if I said it out... In the end, it was really hard to inform everyone."

I felt glad at seeing everyone so concerned about me.

Eh? Could this mean...

"What's wrong, Doremi-chan?"

"Erm, well..."

I didn't trust myself to explain this clearly, but if Kotake really liked me, did that mean that we could get together as a couple?

Kotake had always been looking after me. Even though he always complained about it, he was somehow always there to protect me. I've always felt that he wouldn't have done all those things if they had been for anyone else but me.

"Doesn't that mean that he likes you?"

Onpu-chan might be right.

It felt as if we had always been a couple.

"Doremi-chan, why don't you go ask him in person, instead of writing letters or calling? You're both in the same school, so it's silly that your relationship is so sour," Hazuki-chan said. However, I felt like he had been purposefully avoiding me these days.

"That's right. It'll definitely give you some peace of mind," Onpu-chan agreed.

"Onpu-chan can be really aggressive..."

But being aggressive had gotten us our jobs at the MAHO-do, and helped us to solve various problems using magic, and made us new friends, to list a few things.

High school was a place where lots of students coming from faraway places gather, and I had made friends who taught me about lots of things which I'd never even known about.

If I had a boyfriend, would I treasure him more than those friends?

I know I don't have a boyfriend now, but I couldn't help but worry.

After voicing out these concerns, Hazuki-chan smiled and assured me, "It's alright, Doremi-chan. I'm attached to Yada-kun right now, but I still love and treasure all you girls, my friends at Karen Girls' Academy, and my family, too."

Lala winked and continued, "There's just so many things you young ones want to do. It's really hard to drop everything and just focus on love."

Just then, my mobile phone suddenly rang with a new message.

"Ah, it's from Ai-chan!"

Hazuki-chan glanced at the clock in the store and added, "The competition probably just ended!"

According to a message she sent out in the morning, Ai-chan had proceeded on to the finals, with a timing that ranked her fifth during the heats. I immediately put in a call to her.

"Hello, Ai-chan, how was it?"

However, Ai-chan remained silent.

"What's wrong, Ai-chan?"

Everyone worriedly gathered around me.

"Hello, Ai-chan!"

I dimly heard a whimpering sound.

"Ai-chan... is crying."

"Ehh?!"

"Ai-chan, what's wrong?! Did you do badly?"

"...Not really..." She finally replied.

"Don't tell me you won, and are crying happy tears?" Majorika called out.

"No no..." Ai-chan immediately answered.

"So why are you crying?"

"It's tears of regret."

"Tears of regret?"

"I lost to first place by only 0.01 seconds, and I'm so, so regretful..."

"Wait! So that means you're in second place?!"

"Yeah..."

Just then, Hazuki-chan snatched the phone from me, "Ai-chan, that's awesome! You're second place in the Inter-High Competition. After competing with second and third-year seniors from high schools all over the country, you came out as the second fastest, right?"

"Well, that's true..."

Onpu-chan grabbed the phone next, "You're really awesome! I think you should be proud of that."

"Ehh? Why is Onpu-chan over there?"

I grabbed the phone back, "Well, Onpu-chan came to Tokyo and has signed on to a company here!"

"Really! That's our Onpu-chan! Doremi-chan, please hand the phone to Onpu-chan"

"Oh, okay."

Forgetting the fact that she was crying a minute ago, Ai-chan started chatting with Onpu-chan.

Watching Onpu-chan enjoy herself as she laughed and talked, Hazuki-chan, Majorika and Lala smiled too.

However, I was the only one who felt different.

Hazuki-chan, Ai-chan and Onpu-chan had all found the paths that they wanted to follow, and had started to walk on firmly.

However, I...

I had just turned sixteen, so I probably shouldn't be feeling so anxious.

But, everyone already seemed like adults.

Am I still a child?

No, that's not true.

Either way, if I didn't clear up this thing with Kotake, I wouldn't be able to move forward.

I don't even know if he hadn't replied yet because he was shy, or because he didn't feel like rejecting me outright.

But even if we don't become a couple, I still want us to remain friends.

With that, I would be able to go support him at his soccer matches wholeheartedly.

Now, I just need to speak to Kotake!



As I was too shy to speak over the phone with Kotake, I went to look for him during his morning soccer training session in school the next day.

Kotake, who was already a regular team player despite his freshman status, had been really busy. Spotting me but aware of his teammates' gazes, Kotake approached me only when his break time began.

"W-what is it?"

"There's something I wanna talk to you about; can you spare me some time?"

"..." Kotake seemed to have caught on to what I was implying, but he kept silent.

Just then, the coach blew his whistle, a signal for the training session to resume.

"Sorry. Let's do this. Training ends at ten, so why don't you meet me in front of the fountain at Misora Park at eleven? I'll definitely head over."

Without waiting for my reply, Kotake dashed off towards his teammates.



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I made my way to the MAHO-do, where Ai-chan was back at work after returning from the Inter-High competition, and told her about what had happened.

"Got it. I'll let Majorika know that you won't be coming in today."

With Ai-chan's support, I headed over to Misora Park.

"Doremi-chan, fight!" I had smiled and saluted at Ai-chan when she said that, but as I neared Misora Park, my heart started to beat harder.

I arrived ten minutes before the scheduled time.

There was a library inside the park, and the place was crowded with elementary school kids who had completed their summer vacation assignments.

When they saw me, the kids started to giggle amongst themselves.

I glanced at the surface of the fountain's pool, thinking that I must look really weird now.

I really did look quite pathetic.

There was no trace of the lively freshman I usually was.

Speaking of which, when I was still in elementary school, I used to think of high school girls as old ladies. I hoped that I would never turn into one of them.

Now, I realized that I looked worse than those girls I used to see.

What if Kotake saw me like this, too?

I jogged over to a water cooler nearby and thoroughly washed my face.

However, as I was about to wipe my face dry, I realized that I had forgotten to bring my handkerchief with me.

W-what should I do...

"Looks like you forgot your handkerchief. Here, use this," Kotake fished a towel out of his sports bag and handed it to me.

The towel stank of sweat, but I was in no position to complain. Wiping my dripping face dry, I replied, "T-thank you..."

As I was handing the towel back to him, Kotake suddenly bowed his head, "...I'm sorry! I really wanted to write you a reply immediately, but I didn't know how to do it right, so that's why I haven't given a reply yet."

"It's alright; I'm bad at writing letters too," I had wanted to give a cheeky reply, like how Onpu-chan and Ai-chan always does, but it turned out awkward in the end.

"But I really want to write you a reply. Will you give me some more time?"

"Eh? It's ok... There's really no need."

No, being able to talk to you like this is good enough.

I wanted to say it, but it was really awkward. However, Kotake looked really serious, so he would probably do things the way he wants to.

"The soccer preliminaries are coming up. I'll be really busy, but I'll definitely write you a reply."

"OK. You *are* part of the regular team, after all. Good luck."

"It's okay, we're a strong team. Even so, if I don't work hard, my position on the team can be snatched away by someone else, so I have to work hard every day."

"I see... Do your best."

Before I knew it, Kotake and I had held a long conversation.

Kotake really seemed like an adult now.

I've been like this really often recently, having such negative thoughts. I shook my head hard to get rid of them.

"What's wrong?"

"N-nothing. So... I'll be waiting for your reply!" I waved at Kotake and dashed off.

Thanks to everyone's advice, I've finally talked to him.

I might still be more childish and naive than everyone else, but I wouldn't give in so easily anymore.

Also, I should look on the bright side. Since I'm a late bloomer, I can always receive good advice from everyone.



"Doremi-chan, if you don't improve yourself, Kotake-kun will grow tired of you real soon," Onpu-chan said.

"Yeah, if you like Kotake-kun, then you should find out more about him, right?" Hazuki-chan added.

"...You're really silly, Doremi-chan," Ai-chan chided.

Boohooohoo. All you people are so unforgiving.

It's like Cinderella. Witch apprentices, please help me.

"But it's okay, I don't know the rules for soccer either. Why don't you go check out the bookstore on your way home?" Onpu-chan suggested.

"It'll be quicker if you can watch a DVD or something instead. Oh, the J-League is on now, so how about asking your Dad to explain things to you?" Hazuki-chan added.

"Well, either way, it's good that you came to consult us first," Ai-chan said.

I had received a letter from Kotake.

It came in early September, soon after summer vacation ended.

The contents were simpler than what I had imagined, so much so that I wished he had just replied me straight that day.

Basically, what he wrote was "I want you to accompany me to Kunitachi", and that he would tell me about his feelings then.

"Kunitachi is located somewhere along the Chuo Railway Line, right? What's so special about that place?"

We were all gathered, as usual, at the workspace in MAHO-do.

By the way, it was our off-day, and we were busy with stocktaking and sticking of pricetags. Sitting before me were my three good friends, trying to rein in their concerned expressions.

Even Onpu-chan, who was taking a break between lessons, had turned up because she was worried about me.

Boohooohoo... This is a mistake. All these people here were the worst, since they knew all about my weaknesses.

If I thought about it, my whole life had been a series of confrontations like this. I really never learn from past experiences.

"Alright, I guess I'll explain," Onpu-chan pretended to adjust a pair of glasses on her face, then stood up. She looked like a teacher about to explain things to me.

"First, it's not Kunitachi, but "Kokuritsu" (1). It's short for "Kokuritsu Gyoujijou" or the National Stadium. That's where they hold the annual National Soccer Meet, like how Koshien Stadium is where the National Baseball Tournament is held. The prelims are held at each prefecture, but the semifinals onwards are held at the National Stadium. By the way, the rugby tournament is also ongoing at the same time... Are you still with me, Doremi-chan?"

"Yes, I'm not asleep!"

She was totally acting like a teacher.

However, I still could not process what she had just said, even though it was just a small amount of information.

"Sensei... I mean, Onpu-chan, question! Kotake said that he'll be competing in the prelims soon"

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1: Kokuritsu (国立) means "national". The same kanji can also be read as "kunitachi", hence Doremi's mix-up.



Onpu-chan giggled and replied, "That's right. The team hasn't been chosen to represent the prefecture yet, so Kokuritsu is still far away. Therefore—"

The true bishoujo leaned in close as she continued, "It's still okay that you've mistakenly called Kokuritsu as "Kunitachi". Isn't that a relief?"

She was acting just like a queen, and I wondered if she was trying to mimic Tamaki Reika.

"Our school's soccer team has a great coach, and is quite strong and famous. So there's no doubt that they would be chosen to represent the prefecture, but Doremi-chan still needs to find out more," Ai-chan added.

"That's right. Asking you to accompany him to Kokuritsu is almost like a confession. If Doremi-chan can learn more about soccer rules, watching and supporting the matches together with him will be more enjoyable," Hazuki-chan said.

"I guess Kotake-kun still hasn't worked up the confidence yet. Kokuritsu may seem close, but it's still a far-off goal. Besides, soccer isn't an individual sport, so he is working on fulfilling his dream of playing on Kokuritsu's field right now," Onpu-chan said.

"... I see. It's really hard being a freshman regular," I mused.

Seems like I had been making assumptions again, thinking that the only problem he was facing was whether he liked me or not, or whether he should get together with me or not.

If I hadn't found out all these things about soccer and the hardships of being a regular today, I'd probably have gone off and asked him to choose between me and soccer.

I was glad I consulted everyone first. Friends are really awesome.

"Maybe you should watch matches on TV with your Dad. He's a fishing expert, so he probably knows lots about other sports too. You'll be able to learn from him," Hazuki-chan suggested.

"That's true. Dads with teenage daughters often feel lonely, so if his daughter tries to communicate with him, he'll surely be glad," Ai-chan added.

"Just say that you'd like to learn more about soccer rules because a friend of yours from elementary school just became a regular player. He won't suspect a thing," Onpu-chan said.

"Yep yep, I'll work hard."

I'll work hard to learn more about soccer and remember the rules.

Kotake was working so hard, and if I didn't know anything, I wouldn't even be able to talk to him about anything aside from superficial things like winning and losing.

I should start by learning how to feel joy or regret together with him.

**END OF CHAPTER 5**

And with that, I finally stood at the same starting point as my close friends, ready to live out my high school life.

However, Ai-chan, who was probably having the most fulfilling high school life out of us all, suddenly appeared one day at the MAHO-do looking all depressed.

Three days ago, she had been so proud to be chosen to represent our prefecture at the national track meet. "If I can achieve good results at the nationals, I'd be selected to enter a university famous for their track team, and becoming an Olympic runner won't be a dream anymore! I'll work super hard!"

"What's wrong, why the dark face?" I asked.

"I feel super out of place in the track team."

"What? What do you mean?"

Misora High School's track team was small to begin with, and on top of that, was recently experiencing a decline. What Ai-chan was saying was that she was the only one who was training really hard in the team, and that made her feel out of place.

There were even seniors who told her that joining the team should just be a fun activity, and that her serious attitude was an eyesore.

"Don't be bothered by them! Isn't it your dream to compete in the Olympics and win a gold medal?"

"Yeah..."

"I think that the other members are just envious that Ai-chan is progressing towards her goal. Don't let their opinions get to you, just continue to practice like you've always done"

"Thank you, Doremi-chan. I feel better now," Ai-chan said with a smile.

~~~~~

At that time, I felt that Ai-chan was just putting on a strong front, but after one week, the Ai-chan I saw in school was the usual, super carefree self she had always been.

"Seems like my advice worked," I called out to Ai-chan one day, as she was training in the schoolyard after school.

"Oh, no, it's because of him," Ai-chan laughed and pointed at someone.

"Oh, that hunk?! Ai-chan, don't tell me you've gotten a new boyfriend?!"

"Eh? Who are you looking at?! I'm pointing at him, the guy who is with coach Nagao-sensei now"

I looked away from the hunky senior to see an old man, who looked to be about 68 years old, conversing with Nagao-sensei, all while shouting commands at the track members who were jogging past.

"He's Iiyama-san, a senior from the pioneer batch of our school and an old boy on the track team. He used to be one of the candidates selected to compete in the Olympic 100-m dash."

"Wow, an old boy from the pioneer batch..."

"He has been coming down to watch us train recently. He also got all those lazy seniors to start training seriously."

"I see. Finally, someone who understands Ai-chan has shown up."

"That's not all. He has given me lots of advice and tips, so I can try to beat my own record now."

"I see."

Just then, Iiyama-san spotted us and came over.

"Senoo, why are you slacking off?"

"Ah, I'm sorry."

"Erm... I was the one who called out to her."

Iiyama-san looked at me doubtfully.

"This is my close friend, Harukaze Doremi-chan."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Harukaze," I bowed slightly.

"See you, Doremi-chan. I need to go train."

With that, Ai-chan went back to working on her starting sprint.

Iiyama-san watched Ai-chan through narrowed eyes.

"Iiyama-san, thank you."

"Hmm?"

"For helping Ai-chan with various things... I just want to say thank you, too."

"Save your thanks. I decided to help Senoo on my own accord. That girl has a chance of going to the Olympics."

"Really?!" Unknowingly, I had shouted out loud. "S-sorry, I didn't mean to shout at a super senpai," I apologized, bowing my head.

Iiyama-san laughed out loud. "You're just like Senoo, a girl with personality."

"R-really? You're making me blush."

"Hahahaha, how fun it would be to have grandkids like you girls."

"Doesn't Iiyama-san have any grandchildren?"

Iiyama-san's expression immediately darkened.

At that moment, he really resembled a roly-poly Daruma Doll.

"E-erm... Did I say something wrong?"

Iiyama-san ignored my question and walked away.

His retreating back looked so lonely.

~~~~~

"Oh, so he said that to Doremi-chan, too. He said it to me when I asked about his grandchildren too, then he just got upset. Don't worry about it too much."

We were on our way to the MAHO-do after Ai-chan's training. I had looked so anxious, as if I was stepping in a minefield, that Ai-chan had to comfort me.

"Maybe his grandchildren died?"

"Nah. Iiyama-san lives at a contractor's store in front of the train station, and I've seen a pair of sisters, a middle school girl and an elementary school girl, returning from school to that house."

"I see... So maybe they don't get along well?"

"I don't know. Anyway, asking so many questions seems rude."

"But he is a very important person to Ai-chan, right?"

"Yea. But even so..."

"Maybe liyama-san cannot communicate well with his grandkids. I really think so. Hey, maybe we should investigate a little and find out more."

"But how?"

Just as I was about to say "with magic", we heard a car braking in front of the store, and a horn soon sounded.

Ai-chan and I looked out the window at the road to see a taxi parked outside. Ai-chan's dad was leaning out the driver's seat window.

"Dad, what's up?"

"Aiko, rejoice! I've bought a new takoyaki grill set!" Ai-chan's dad said happily as he showed us a huge bag with the grill set inside.

"Our takoyaki grill broke down, and so we hadn't been eating any these days," Ai-chan explained to me.



"Haha, then that's great," I replied with a somewhat amazed look.

I knew that the takoyaki grill is a must-have item for Osaka families, but it's really not an essential thing for us Kanto people.

"Doremi-chan, come to have takoyaki with us soon."

"Of course! Uncle makes the best takoyaki!"

Just then, Ai-chan shouted, "I know!"

What?

"We can have a takoyaki party at my place and invite Iiyama-san!"

"Ah, that sounds good!" I replied.



The next Sunday, Ai-chan's family, Hazuki-chan and I, as well as Iiyama-san, were invited for a takoyaki party at Ai-chan's apartment.

Onpu-chan had gone for auditions, so she was not present.

The takoyaki made by Ai-chan's father were truly the best, and everyone asked for seconds.

Ai-chan's parents and Hazuki-chan then began asking Iiyama-san about his grandchildren.

Ai-chan's mum and Hazuki-chan were full of praises for the alcohol and kept getting Iiyama-san to have more, so he was in a good mood.

With that, Iiyama-san started to tell the story of how he was selected as an Olympic candidate when he was only 26 years old.

He had gone on from Misora High School to a sports university, then joined his company's track team, and was subsequently chosen as a candidate. He was to attend a competition to determine if he would represent the country at the games.

However, right before the competition, Iiyama-san's father, who operated the contractor's store, suddenly passed away, and Iiyama-san had to throw away his Olympic dream and succeed his father's business to support his family.

Since then, he had abandoned track altogether to work for his family and company, and now, his son had taken over the family business.

"It must be good to retire," Ai-chan's mum said as she poured him another glass of Japanese sake.

"It's embarrassing to admit this, but I'm not on good terms with my family," Iiyama-san replied with a bitter smile. "We don't gather as a family the way you do like this. I often have my meals alone in my room"

"How did it become that way?" Hazuki-chan asked as she took her turn to pour him more wine.

"Maybe I'm just cranky, or stubborn... I often give snide remarks, and so the family doesn't like me."

"But isn't there a saying, 'The young should listen to the old and wise'?" Ai-chan's dad joined in the conversation as he came in with a plate of freshly-grilled takoyaki.

The topic then moved on the Ai-chan's grandpa, who had passed away the previous year.

When Ai-chan's parents had wanted to get married, her grandpa had opposed them and even disinherited Ai-chan's mother. He wouldn't even let them come to visit when grandma passed away, and their relationship was full of sorrow. Even Ai-chan herself suffered trauma from the fact that her grandpa had hit her mother, and she confessed that she could not even look an elderly male in the eye for the longest time.

"If that's the case, why did you invite me today?"

"Because I want to overcome that trauma, after I saw how Doremi-chan's grandpa was so nice to her," Ai-chan replied.

"My grandpa lives in Hida, and even though he doesn't speak, he's a very kind man," I added.

"Grandfathers might be scary, but I've come to realize that they are an irreplaceable and precious part of the family," Ai-chan concluded.

"....."

"Iiyama-san, why don't you try talking to your family more?"

"Communication can be troublesome, but it's important, right?"

Iiyama-san remained silent to Ai-chan's parents' advice before replying in a lonely tone, "I know what you mean... But this stubborn personality can never be changed. If my father had not passed away then, and I could join the Olympics, my life and personality would probably be vastly different now."

With that, he thanked us and took his leave.

~~~~~

After cleaning up the party, we packed up the leftover takoyaki and headed over to the MAHO-do to give them to Majorika and Lala. On our way, we discussed worriedly about Iiyama-san's problems.

"We really can't leave Iiyama-san like that," Ai-chan said.

"Maybe we can create a chance for Iiyama-san to get along with his grandchildren and family?" Hazuki-chan suggested.

"I don't know about creating chances, but he seemed to have developed this stubborn attitude after he lost his chance to take part in the Olympics," I pointed out.

"Yep, that was what he said," Ai-chan confirmed.

"Can we make it such that he can take part in the race?" Hazuki-chan asked.

"That's impossible... No! We have Magical Stage!" Ai-chan exclaimed.

"But wait. Won't that be changing history?..."

"It's alright. Magical Stage is not that powerful. I think it'll come in the form of a dream."

"I see."

"Alright. Let's do it tonight!"

~~~~~

That night, we transformed into witch apprentices and gathered on the roof of Iiyama-san's home.

"Let's do this!"

We summoned our Kururu Porons together.

"Pirika pirilala, freely!"

"Paipai ponpoi, flexibly!"

"Pameruku raruku, sonorously!"

When Magical Stage appeared, we shouted in unison, "Let Iiyama-san take part in the Olympic candidate race."

Magical Stage glowed and went to work.



"Magical Stage was a success!" Ai-chan screamed the next morning as she dashed into class after her morning training.

"Really?" I asked.

"When Iiyama-san came for training today, he told me of this dream he had."

"What was it?"

"He dreamt that he won second place."

"I see... But isn't that something bad?"

Ai-chan shook her head. "He said that he was happy that he managed to participate at all. He also did some reflection, and decided to stop blaming his family for not allowing him to take part in the race, and that he would try to communicate more with them."

"Will they have meals together again?"

"Maybe next time. He managed to greet them good morning today."

"Yep, yep, greetings are important. So how was their reaction?"

"They seemed shocked at first, but then everyone greeted him back."

"Heh, that's great."

"I don't think so."

"Huh?"

"I was so happy that I got carried away... So I ended up promising him that I'll get a gold medal at the upcoming National Meet."

"Well, just win it, then."

"It's not that easy. Quite a few Olympic candidates have registered too. Iiyama-san even said that he'll come to support me. What should I do?"

"There's nothing you can do since you've already promised. It's time to show everyone your Osakan willpower!"

"... You're right! Yoshaaaaa!"

Looks like Ai-chan needed to work hard from now on.



The National Meet was to take place in Hyogo Prefecture at the end of September.

Onpu-chan could not make it down due to auditions, but Hazuki-chan, Majorika, Lala and I closed up the MAHO-do temporarily and came down to support Ai-chan. At this moment, we were gathered at the Kobe Track Stadium stands, the venue for the competition.

Of course, Ai-chan's parents, dressed in matching happi coats and headbands, also came to support her.



The preliminary rounds of the 100-m dash for adult women took place in the morning, and the semi-finals followed right after noon. The finals were scheduled for four-thirty in the afternoon.

Our Ai-chan competed against adult women and university students and won first place in the prelims, and second place in the semi-finals, and would be proceeding to the finals.

Out of the eight competitors in the finals, there were many strong opponents, as Ai-chan had warned. There were three Olympic candidates, one of who represented Japan, as well as the Year 3 high school student from Kobe who beat Ai-chan at the Inter-High competition in August.

Ai-chan's time for the semi-finals ranked fifth out of the finalists, but the other competitors were on the lookout, and had watched and analysed her running. However, to my eyes, Ai-chan seemed to be lacking in the same type of focus.

She was probably worrying over the fact that Iiyama-san, who had promised to come and support her, was not present.

"Maybe he couldn't get along with his grandchildren after all..." Ai-chan whispered worriedly to us when she came over to the first row of the stands where we were camped to speak to her before the competition.

"Ai-chan, focus on the race!"

"Show them the Osakan power!"

## Chapter 6 "Run towards tomorrow!"

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Giving a nod at our cheers, Ai-chan jogged slowly over onto the track's starting point.

"Senoo, sorry I'm late!" A familiar voice rang out from the top of the stands.

It was Iiyama-san, together with a middle school girl and an elementary school girl who were probably his grandchildren.

"Grandpa Iiyama..." Ai-chan stood and stared.

Slowly, her face brightened up.

Just then, Iiyama-san and his two grandchildren unfurled a handmade banner.

The words, "Winner! Contestant Senoo Aiko, go get that gold medal!" were written on it.

"I reached Kobe yesterday, but my grandkids wanted to finish this up, so we took more time than expected," Iiyama-san explained.

"Ai-chan, we've heard all about you from Grandpa! Good luck!"

"Ai-chan, fight!"

Iiyama-san's two grandchildren called out their support. Hearing them, Ai-chan clenched her fists, nodded wordlessly to the three on the stands, and got into starting position.

You may not believe me, but from my seat on the stands, I could clearly feel the aura of strong willpower surging out of Ai-chan's back.

Ai-chan positioned herself on the starting blocks and waited for the pistol that signaled the start of the race to sound.

While the Onpu-chan before the camera and on stage is beautiful, I felt that in that moment, Ai-chan was beautiful in a totally different way.

The sharp eyes focused on her goal, the tightly-closed mouth, and the much-admired muscles of her thighs... She was artistically beautiful.

And when the pistol sounded and she bounded off, I was totally fascinated.

Ai-chan had exploded!

After her rocket-like start, she dashed towards the finishing line, unaware of the Olympic candidates and rivals, as she moved to fulfill her promise to Iiyama-san to get a gold medal. She's so awesome.

Her final timing was 11.52 seconds, 0.22 seconds faster than her personal best. This also broke the record for fastest time run by a high school student.

In that moment, Senoo Aiko rose as a new star in the world of Japan Track & Field.

Hazuki-chan and I embraced the grandchildren, while Iiyama-san smiled happily. I wanted to give that smile to Ai-chan, but settled for happy clapping instead.



While we were drunk on Ai-chan's victory, Onpu-chan was struggling alone.

We had chosen to become witch apprentices, but Onpu-chan had refused to become one.

She did not want to grow to rely on magic again.

That's right. Her life was so different from ours. She had separated from her family and was now living alone, and in school, she had more rivals than friends. Onpu-chan must have felt lots of anxiety.

Magic is something which should be used as a last resort to help others in need, when there is really no other solution. This may sound obvious, but it is the very basis of magic.

Personally, I would have started to use magic to make life easier for myself. It was only through everyone's support and help that I had refrained from doing so.

Back to Onpu-chan. There were many people in school, as well as her fans and people in the industry, who knew her when she was a child idol.

There were also many who were shocked at the physical changes she had undergone.

We knew from the very start that although she looked different now, Onpu-chan was still the same inside.

However, people wouldn't know that if they only knew Onpu-chan by watching her on TV.

"How is Onpu-chan? Is she doing well?" Ai-chan asked.

I shook my head. "She just sent me a message to say that she had forfeited the auditions."

This was the second time it had happened. Instead of returning to working with TV shows, Onpu-chan had chosen to make her re-debut through stage performance. However, her office had been introducing her to work on TV programmes. And they were not even drama shows, but all variety show programmes.

"Her former fame can only carry her for this long. She is probably determined to show that she really wants to become an actress," Ai-chan reasoned.

"But Onpu-chan is working so hard. Her voice is really nice, and her singing has improved, too," Hazuki-chan said.

Onpu-chan was not working at the MAHO-do right now, but she comes to Misora City every week to visit.

She also did vocal lessons in a soundproof room at Hazuki-chan's house. While Hazuki-chan could play the piano for her, my mum usually went over to help Onpu-chan with both voice projection and piano playing.

Of course, she also went for dance and English lessons every other day, as well as physical training, and studying various movie films and musicals. It was truly a tough schedule.

However, it was also true that Onpu-chan's skills had improved.

"She's probably much better than other singers her age," Hazuki-chan mused

"Wow, but that means we can no longer sing karaoke with her. She'll be too good," Ai-chan said.

We used to go for karaoke sessions together sometimes, and Onpu-chan had always been good.

"Fufufu. So Onpu-chan is finally going to surpass me," I said with a smirk.

"Just what kind of audition will she choose to go for next?" Ai-chan wondered.

"I heard that she went for quite a few recently. She plans to take part in a musical, so she's been training up her diaphragm and doing vocal training."

Ehh?

Isn't anybody going to respond to me?

Ai-chan didn't even pass any smart retorts.

Now that we're high school girls, am I losing my position as the group leader?



The next Sunday, Onpu-chan came to the MAHO-do, and the store became lively.

My little sister Pop also came with her friends to visit us that day.

Despite her hard work, Pop's grades often fluctuated above and below the entry requirement for Karen Girls' Academy, so she had come today to buy a bracelet that could help grant wishes.

"If I don't get in, I'll start spreading rumours about how MAHO-do's magical goods are all fakes," Pop warned proudly as she spoke to me.

## Chapter 6 “Run towards tomorrow!”

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Onpu-chan poked her head out from the workspace and answered in my stead, "Pop-chan, I was the one who made that bracelet." She waved her hand at Pop, and we saw an identical bracelet on her own wrist.

"I'll be alright if I wear a matching bracelet with Onpu-chan! Yosh, time to go home and study!"

Pop had heard from me about how Onpu-chan was working really hard to re-debut as an actress. So, waving to Onpu-chan, she left with her friends.

The rest of the morning was really busy too, with groups of friends from elementary school days, current classmates, and troupes of good girl friends from middle school coming to the store.

Thanks to Onpu-chan's help, Majorika and I managed to pull through the day.

In the afternoon, Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan came in to work too.

"It's been a while since I've had my four shop beauties gathered together," Majorika said with a smile to Lala.

~~~~~

When Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan came in in the afternoon, I finally managed to find some time to have a late lunch.

While I rested at the workspace, I watched my three close friends working.

All three of them were living their lives to the fullest, much to my envy.

Compared to them, I was just...

"Ha~~~~ah," I let out a huge sigh.

"What's wrong, Doremi-chan?" Hazuki-chan came over with a cup of tea.

"Well, well, Onpu-chan, Hazuki-chan and Ai-chan all have your own goals and are striving hard. I'm just envious because all of you are living your lives to the fullest."

"It's not really something to be envious of. It's good to have a goal, but there's no point if that causes you to lose sight of everything else. It's important to know about stuff outside of what we learn in school, and to experience lots of things," Hazuki-chan countered. "I love playing the violin, so I go for lessons every day, but I'm not a genius at it, and I might not even become a professional player. Right now, I just wish for my music to reach out to someone."

Did Ai-chan think the same way when she entered the track club as well?

"Sigh, but you know. Don't you feel that it's a burden to have me as a close friend? Someone who doesn't have any talent, and who isn't working hard at something?" I asked.

"What?" I heard two voices speak at once.

"Ai-chan... Onpu-chan!"

Ai-chan and Onpu-chan joined us with cups of tea.

"Doremi-chan has no idea of her virtues," Hazuki-chan explained.

"Well, it's usual for Doremi-chan not to know anything," Ai-chan retorted.

"Doremi-chan, it's impossible for someone to have no virtues at all," Onpu-chan assured me.

"But Doremi-chan has been puzzling over this issue lots recently," Ai-chan said.

I did not know if I really had any virtues even after what they had said, but I knew that they were speaking sincerely.

"It's not like Doremi-chan to compare herself with others."

"Really? Oh, that's right. I'm sorry."

"That's right, it's good to be honest."

Maybe I just don't know my own virtues.

It would be nice if I could find out what they were soon.

Hmm... But I've realized that none of my friends had given me a definite answer. So just what exactly are my virtues?



The next day, I was still puzzling over the issue and could not concentrate in class. Leon spotted my inattention and I received a lecture from him.

He was such a cool guy outside of school, but he could be really strict in the classroom.

"Harukaze, I'm disappointed in you! Go wash your face!"

"Alright, alright..."

"Just one 'alright' is enough! Also, clean up the washroom before you come back!"

"Ehhhh!"

"The correct reply would be 'yes sir'!"

"Yes sir..."

In the end, I took so long to clean up the place that it was recess, and Ai-chan came by to help out.

"Are you still worrying over yesterday's issue?"

"But none of you could name a good thing about me after all."

"W-Well..."

"See, you can't even name one."

"That's not true. Oh yes, you can smile immediately the moment anyone mentions steak."

"Well, that's..." I smiled happily as I drooled a little, before going into a panic and retorting, "How's that a good thing?!"

"Haha, I was just joking. But I'm sure Hazuki-chan, Onpu-chan and I can come up with at least 30 good things about Doremi-chan."

Just then, a familiar voice piped up from the washroom's window, "Momo can, too!"

"Hmm?"

Chapter 6 “Run towards tomorrow!”

We turned to the window and spotted a familiar yellow hat.

"Hmmm?"

Ai-chan and I rubbed our eyes and looked again to see a familiar form clad in witch apprentice's garb.



It was Asuka Momoko-chan.

"Hello!"

But this was not the time for that! And she was flying on her broomstick, too!

What if the other students should see her?!

Ahh, what would happen then?

My status with Kotake was still unresolved...

Onpu-chan's re-debut was still in the works...

Either way, the story of sixteen year old Ojamajo Doremi ends here.

The continuation will come in the next book!

Everyone, be happy and lucky!

END OF VOLUME 1

What do you think of the novel?

“When I first heard about Doremi-chan turning 16, I was really excited to find out how she would be like. However, it was hard for me to imagine how a 16 year old Doremi would be like.

However, when I received the manuscript, I was really touched, and thought ‘yes, yes, that’s right’. I was not disappointed in the least. The story was told from the believable perspective of a true 16 year old. And there were parallels drawn with the original anime too, when Onpu-chan did not start off from the same place as the others (Doremi, Hazuki and Aiko). The story’s starting did not betray my expectations. Even though everyone went off to different schools at the end of the anime, I felt the “bonds” which naturally pulled everyone back together again, as if by fate. Doremi herself has really grown too, and I get a slight big sis feel from her. (laugh)”

What are some of your thoughts regarding the anime?

“There were 3 rounds of auditions for the part of Doremi. After the second round, Ishige Sawa-chan, who voiced Pop, told me, ‘the written requirement for the role of Doremi is someone who can be truly dynamic’. When I heard that, I remembered thinking ‘ehh?!”, so it was quite an honour when I was finally chosen for the part. (laugh)

The first time we all met up (Akiya Tomoko-san who voiced Fujiwara Hazuki, and Matsuoka Yuki-san who voiced Senoo Aiko) was for the recording of the opening theme. It happened before we had recorded any episodes so we couldn’t really grasp the right feel, but I remember how everyone just decided to give it their best shot!

Interview with Chiba Chiemi (Harukaze Doremi's seiyuu)

It also made me happy that I met up with many children who told me that they love Doremi. Once during an event, an elementary Grade 2 girl asked me, 'why are Doremi's eyes red?' I didn't have any answer on hand, so I just blabbed out, 'b-because she likes rabbits...' (laugh)"

How was Chiba-san's 16 like?

"It was the year when I started working. I went to school, went for work, went home to do assignments... That's about it. Anyway, I had so much homework! I went to a fashion design school, so I needed to design many clothes and submit countless assignments on my designs..."

Now that I think about it, it was also the time when I really grew more mature. I often worked with people older than me, so I guess I was a little different from other girls my age. That's why I'd like to relive a 16 like the ones which Doremi-chan and friends are having. To hang out with friends her own age after school, that was something I couldn't do in the past~ I really envy Doremi-chan and friends."

Any characters you're really interested in seeing soon?

"Momo-chan! (immediate answer) I'm just so so interested in Momo-chan. And also any developments on Hana-chan in the second book~

I'm also interested in the homeroom teacher Yamaki-sensei. His character is something which had never before appeared in the anime, so I'm really keen to find out more about him."

Any last message for the readers?

Interview with Chiba Chiemi (Harukaze Doremi's seiyuu)

“I really enjoyed reading this book. I hope that everyone will be able to enjoy this grown-up world of Doremi together with me.”

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